The Golden Bowl

Henry James

DELPHI CLASSICS

Parts Edition

The Complete Works of

HENRY JAMES

VOLUME 19 OF 65

The Golden Bowl

Parts Edition
By Delphi Classics, 2016

Version 10

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‘The Golden Bowl’

Henry James: *Parts Edition* *(in 65 parts)*

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HENRY JAMES

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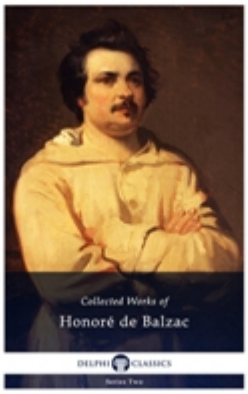

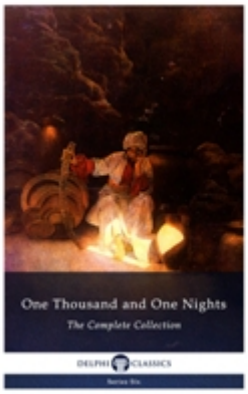

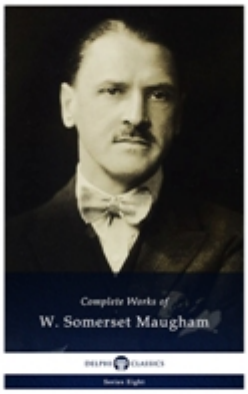

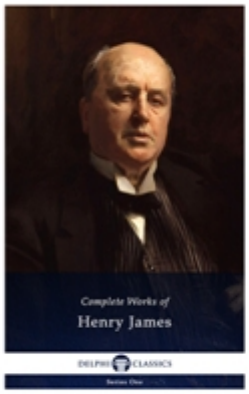

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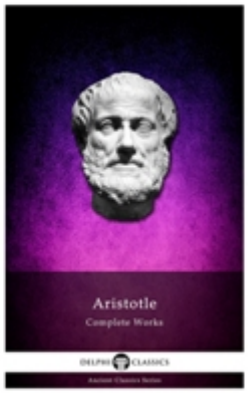

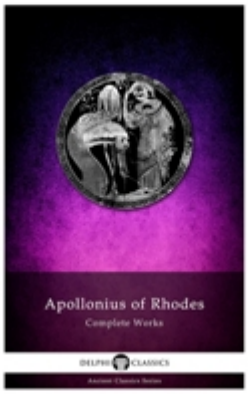

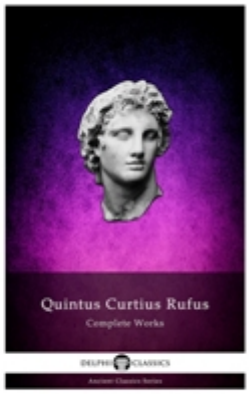

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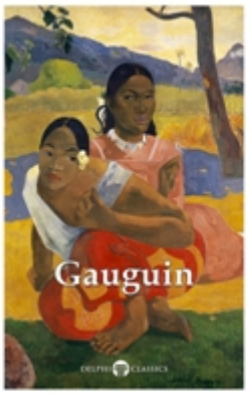

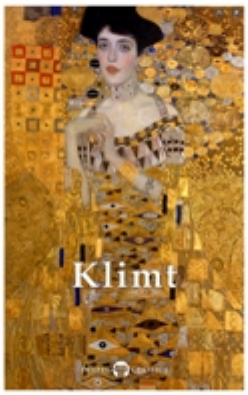

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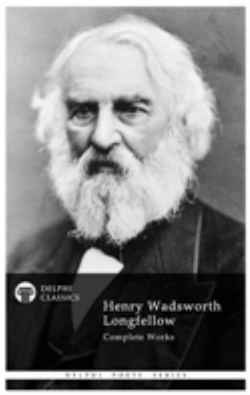

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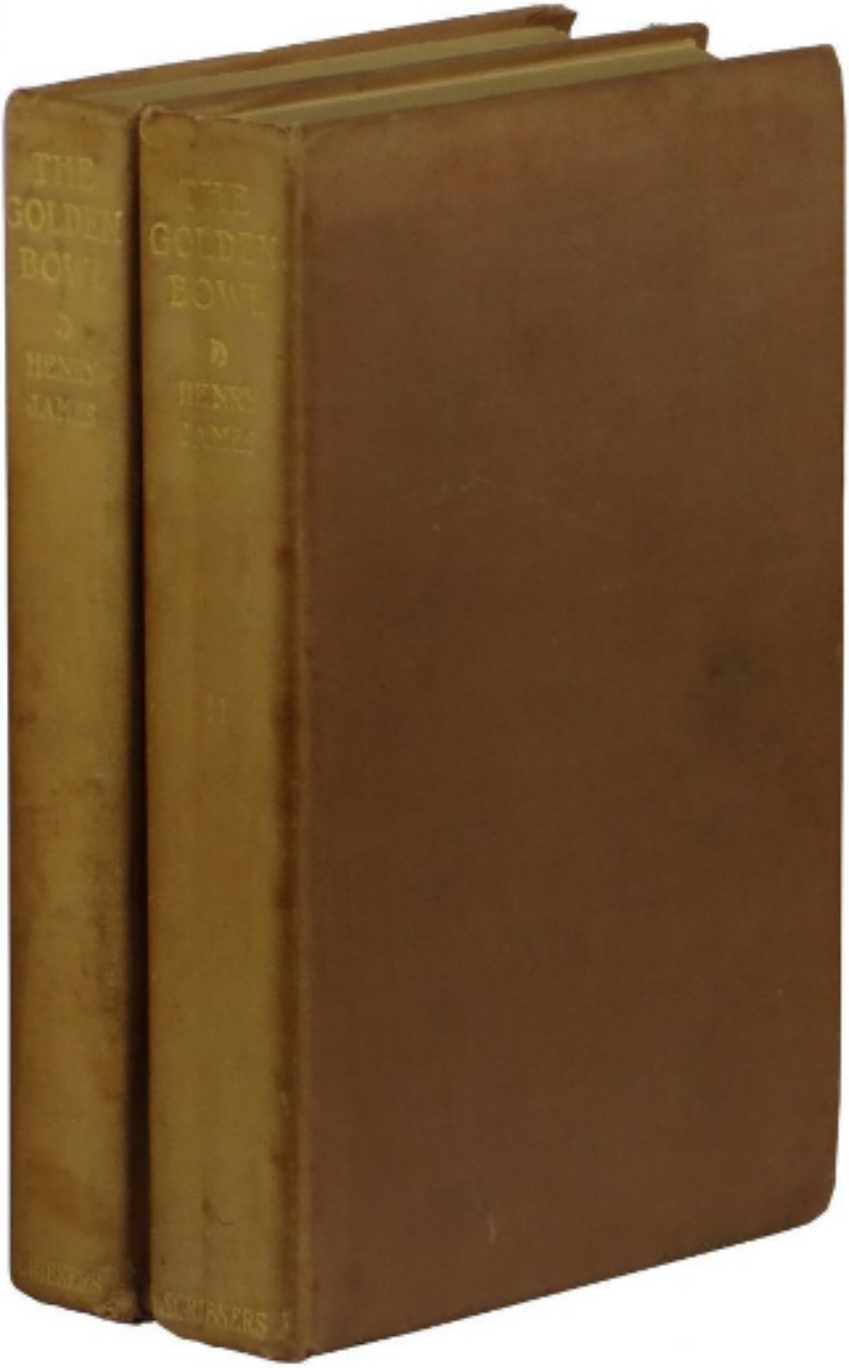
The Golden Bowl

First published in 1904, *The Golden Bowl* is set in England and is a complex, intense study of marriage and adultery, which some critics have judged to complete the "major phase" of James' career. The novel explores the mesh of interrelationships between a father and daughter and their respective spouses, focusing almost exclusively on the consciousness of the central characters, with sometimes obsessive detail, as well as powerful insight.

The narrative concerns Prince Amerigo, an impoverished but charismatic Italian nobleman, who is in London for his marriage to Maggie Verver, the only child of the widower Adam Verver, the incredibly wealthy American financier and art collector. While there, he re-encounters Charlotte Stant, another young American and a former mistress from his days in Rome. Charlotte is not wealthy, which is one reason they did not marry. Maggie and Charlotte have been dear friends since childhood, although Maggie doesn't know of Charlotte and Amerigo's past relationship. In time Amerigo and Charlotte consummate an adulterous affair.

A key theme of *The Golden Bowl* is education. Maggie gradually sheds her childish naïveté and grows into a capable woman. She realises that she can't remain dependent on her father but must accept adult responsibilities in her marriage. Amerigo is portrayed as a European snob and far from scrupulous. But he comes to respect Maggie as she works to save their marriage. The intense focus on four characters gives the novel a tremendous power and a peculiar feeling of claustrophobia. As the book delves deeply and often brilliantly into the consciousness of Amerigo and Maggie, some critics have complained that it loses momentum in a maze of over-analysis.

The text presented in this collection is taken from the 1904 book edition.



The first edition

James, 1910

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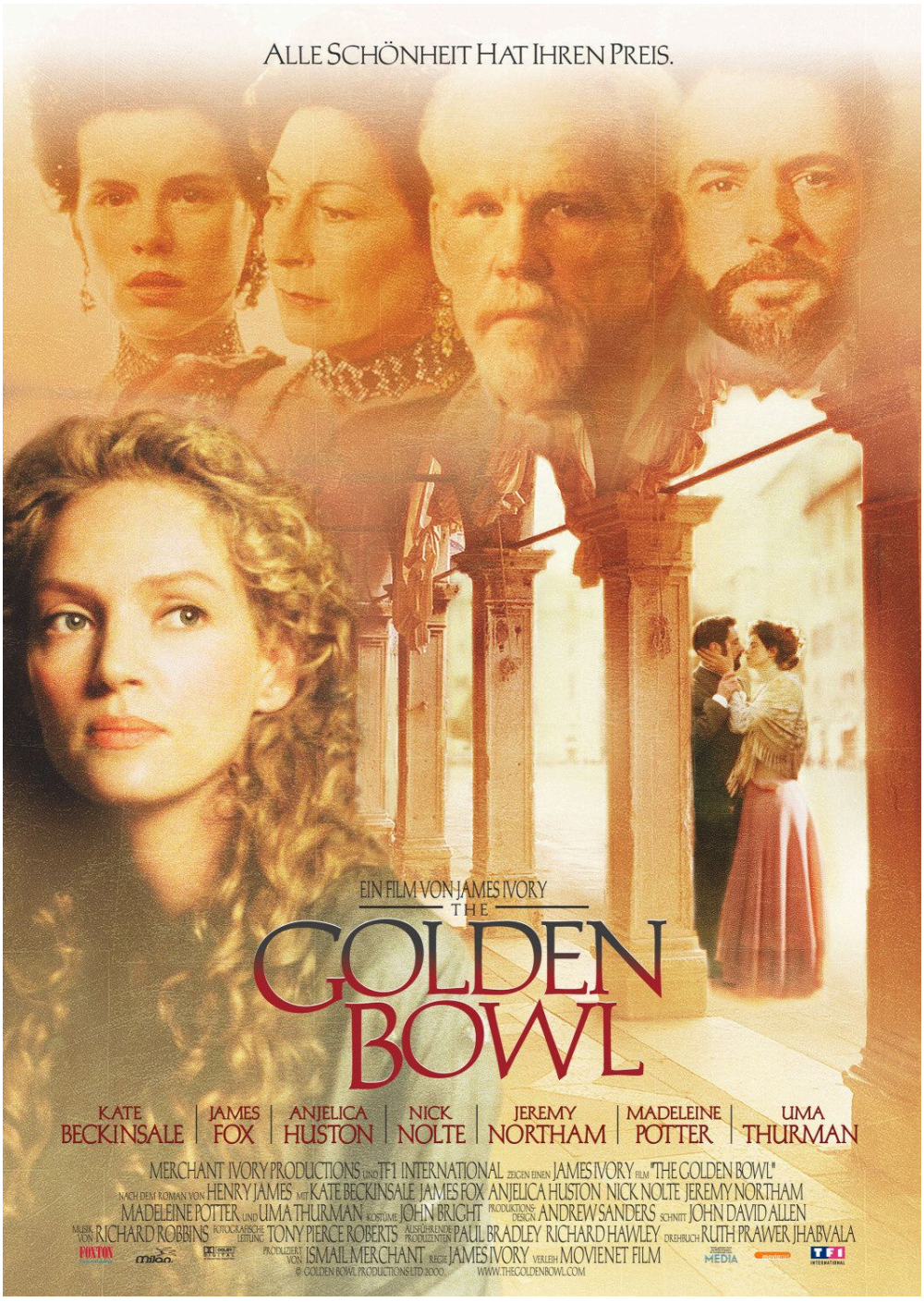
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The 2000 film adaptation

BOOK FIRST: THE PRINCE

PART FIRST

I

The Prince had always liked his London, when it had come to him; he was one of the modern Romans who find by the Thames a more convincing image of the truth of the ancient state than any they have left by the Tiber. Brought up on the legend of the City to which the world paid tribute, he recognised in the present London much more than in contemporary Rome the real dimensions of such a case. If it was a question of an Imperium, he said to himself, and if one wished, as a Roman, to recover a little the sense of that, the place to do so was on London Bridge, or even, on a fine afternoon in May, at Hyde Park Corner. It was not indeed to either of those places that these grounds of his predilection, after all sufficiently vague, had, at the moment we are concerned with him, guided his steps; he had strayed, simply enough, into Bond Street, where his imagination, working at comparatively short range, caused him now and then to stop before a window in which objects massive and lumpish, in silver and gold, in the forms to which precious stones contribute, or in leather, steel, brass, applied to a hundred uses and abuses, were as tumbled together as if, in the insolence of the Empire, they had been the loot of far-off victories. The young man's movements, however, betrayed no consistency of attention — not even, for that matter, when one of his arrests had proceeded from possibilities in faces shaded, as they passed him on the pavement, by huge beribboned hats, or more delicately tinted still under the tense silk of parasols held at perverse angles in waiting victorias. And the Prince's undirected thought was not a little symptomatic, since, though the turn of the season had come and the flush of the streets begun to fade, the possibilities of faces, on the August afternoon, were still one of the notes of the scene. He was too restless — that was the fact — for any concentration, and the last idea that would just now have occurred to him in any connection was the idea of pursuit.

He had been pursuing for six months as never in his life before, and what had actually unsteadied him, as we join him, was the sense of how he had been justified. Capture had crowned the pursuit — or success, as he would otherwise have put it, had rewarded virtue; whereby the consciousness of these things made him, for the hour, rather serious than gay. A sobriety that might have consorted with failure sat in his handsome face, constructively regular and grave, yet at the same time oddly and, as might be, functionally almost radiant, with its dark blue eyes, its dark brown moustache and its expression no more sharply "foreign" to an English view than to have caused it sometimes to be observed of him with a shallow felicity that he looked like a "refined" Irishman. What had happened was that shortly before, at three o'clock, his fate had practically been sealed, and that even when one pretended to no quarrel with it the moment had something of the grimness of a crunched key in the strongest lock that could be made. There was nothing to do as yet, further, but feel what one had done, and our personage felt it while he aimlessly wandered. It was already as if he were married, so definitely had the solicitors, at three o'clock, enabled the date to be fixed, and by so few days was that date now distant. He was to dine at half-past eight o'clock with the young lady on whose behalf, and on whose father's, the London lawyers had reached an inspired harmony with his own man of business, poor Calderoni, fresh from Rome and now apparently in the wondrous situation of being "shown London," before promptly leaving it again, by Mr. Verver himself, Mr. Verver whose easy way with his millions had taxed to such small purpose, in the arrangements, the principle of reciprocity. The reciprocity with which the Prince was during these minutes most struck was that of Calderoni's bestowal of his company for a view of the lions. If there was one thing in the world the young man, at this juncture, clearly intended, it was to be much more decent as a son-in-law than lots of fellows he could think of had shown themselves in that character. He thought of these fellows, from whom he was so to differ, in English; he used, mentally, the English term to describe his difference, for, familiar with the tongue from his earliest years, so that no note of strangeness remained with him either for lip or for ear, he found it convenient, in life, for the greatest number of relations. He found it convenient, oddly, even for his relation with himself — though not unmindful that there might still, as time went on, be others, including a more intimate degree of that one, that would seek, possibly with violence, the larger or the finer issue — which was it? — of the vernacular. Miss Verver had told him he spoke English too well — it was his only fault, and he had not been able to speak worse even to oblige her. "When I speak worse, you see, I speak French," he had said; intimating thus that there were discriminations, doubtless of the invidious kind, for which that language was the most apt. The girl had taken this, she let him know, as a reflection on her own French, which she had always so dreamed of making good, of making better; to say nothing of his evident feeling that the idiom supposed a cleverness she was not a person to rise to. The Prince's answer to such remarks — genial, charming, like every answer the parties to his new arrangement

had yet had from him — was that he was practising his American in order to converse properly, on equal terms as it were, with Mr. Verver. His prospective father-in-law had a command of it, he said, that put him at a disadvantage in any discussion; besides which — well, besides which he had made to the girl the observation that positively, of all his observations yet, had most finely touched her.

"You know I think he's a *real* galantuomo— 'and no mistake.' There are plenty of sham ones about. He seems to me simply the best man I've ever seen in my life."

"Well, my dear, why shouldn't he be?" the girl had gaily inquired.

It was this, precisely, that had set the Prince to think. The things, or many of them, that had made Mr. Verver what he was seemed practically to bring a charge of waste against the other things that, with the other people known to the young man, had failed of such a result. "Why, his 'form,'" he had returned, "might have made one doubt."

"Father's form?" She hadn't seen it. "It strikes me he hasn't got any."

"He hasn't got mine — he hasn't even got yours."

"Thank you for 'even'!" the girl had laughed at him. "Oh, yours, my dear, is tremendous. But your father has his own. I've made that out. So don't doubt it. It's where it has brought him out — that's the point."

"It's his goodness that has brought him out," our young woman had, at this, objected.

"Ah, darling, goodness, I think, never brought anyone out. Goodness, when it's real, precisely, rather keeps people in." He had been interested in his discrimination, which amused him. "No, it's his WAY. It belongs to him."

But she had wondered still. "It's the American way. That's all."

"Exactly — it's all. It's all, I say! It fits him — so it must be good for something."

"Do you think it would be good for you?" Maggie Verver had smilingly asked.

To which his reply had been just of the happiest. "I don't feel, my dear, if you really want to know, that anything much can now either hurt me or help me. Such as I am — but you'll see for yourself. Say, however, I am a galantuomo — which I devoutly hope: I'm like a chicken, at best, chopped up and smothered in sauce; cooked down as a creme de volaille, with half the parts left out. Your father's the natural fowl running about the bassecour. His feathers, movements, his sounds — those are the parts that, with me, are left out."

"All, as a matter of course — since you can't eat a chicken alive!"

The Prince had not been annoyed at this, but he had been positive. "Well, I'm eating your father alive — which is the only way to taste him. I want to continue, and as it's when he talks American that he is most alive, so I must also cultivate it, to get my pleasure. He couldn't make one like him so much in any other language."

It mattered little that the girl had continued to demur — it was the mere play of her joy. "I think he could make you like him in Chinese."

"It would be an unnecessary trouble. What I mean is that he's a kind of result of his inevitable tone. My liking is accordingly FOR the tone — which has made him possible."

"Oh, you'll hear enough of it," she laughed, "before you've done with us."

Only this, in truth, had made him frown a little.

"What do you mean, please, by my having 'done' with you?"

"Why, found out about us all there is to find."

He had been able to take it indeed easily as a joke. "Ah, love, I began with that. I know enough, I feel, never to be surprised. It's you yourselves meanwhile," he continued, "who really know nothing. There are two parts of me" — yes, he had been moved to go on. "One is made up of the history, the doings, the marriages, the crimes, the follies, the boundless betises of other people — especially of their infamous waste of money that might have come to me. Those things are written — literally in rows of volumes, in libraries; are as public as they're abominable. Everybody can get at them, and you've, both of you, wonderfully, looked them in the face. But there's another part, very much smaller doubtless, which, such as it is, represents my single self, the unknown, unimportant, unimportant — unimportant save to YOU — personal quantity. About this you've found out nothing."

"Luckily, my dear," the girl had bravely said; "for what then would become, please, of the promised occupation of my future?"

The young man remembered even now how extraordinarily CLEAR — he couldn't call it anything else — she had looked, in her prettiness, as she had said it. He also remembered what he had been moved to reply.

“The happiest reigns, we are taught, you know, are the reigns without any history.”

“Oh, I’m not afraid of history!” She had been sure of that. “Call it the bad part, if you like — yours certainly sticks out of you. What was it else,” Maggie Verver had also said, “that made me originally think of you? It wasn’t — as I should suppose you must have seen — what you call your unknown quantity, your particular self. It was the generations behind you, the follies and the crimes, the plunder and the waste — the wicked Pope, the monster most of all, whom so many of the volumes in your family library are all about. If I’ve read but two or three yet, I shall give myself up but the more — as soon as I have time — to the rest. Where, therefore” — she had put it to him again— “without your archives, annals, infamies, would you have been?”

He recalled what, to this, he had gravely returned. “I might have been in a somewhat better pecuniary situation.” But his actual situation under the head in question positively so little mattered to them that, having by that time lived deep into the sense of his advantage, he had kept no impression of the girl’s rejoinder. It had but sweetened the waters in which he now floated, tinted them as by the action of some essence, poured from a gold-topped phial, for making one’s bath aromatic. No one before him, never — not even the infamous Pope — had so sat up to his neck in such a bath. It showed, for that matter, how little one of his race could escape, after all, from history. What was it but history, and of THEIR kind very much, to have the assurance of the enjoyment of more money than the palace-builder himself could have dreamed of? This was the element that bore him up and into which Maggie scattered, on occasion, her exquisite colouring drops. They were of the colour — of what on earth? of what but the extraordinary American good faith? They were of the colour of her innocence, and yet at the same time of her imagination, with which their relation, his and these people’s, was all suffused. What he had further said on the occasion of which we thus represent him as catching the echoes from his own thoughts while he loitered — what he had further said came back to him, for it had been the voice itself of his luck, the soothing sound that was always with him. “You Americans are almost incredibly romantic.”

“Of course we are. That’s just what makes everything so nice for us.”

“Everything?” He had wondered.

“Well, everything that’s nice at all. The world, the beautiful, world — or everything in it that is beautiful. I mean we see so much.”

He had looked at her a moment — and he well knew how she had struck him, in respect to the beautiful world, as one of the beautiful, the most beautiful things. But what he had answered was: “You see too much — that’s what may sometimes make you difficulties. When you don’t, at least,” he had amended with a further thought, “see too little.” But he had quite granted that he knew what she meant, and his warning perhaps was needless.

He had seen the follies of the romantic disposition, but there seemed somehow no follies in theirs — nothing, one was obliged to recognise, but innocent pleasures, pleasures without penalties. Their enjoyment was a tribute to others without being a loss to themselves. Only the funny thing, he had respectfully submitted, was that her father, though older and wiser, and a man into the bargain, was as bad — that is as good — as herself.

“Oh, he’s better,” the girl had freely declared “that is he’s worse. His relation to the things he cares for — and I think it beautiful — is absolutely romantic. So is his whole life over here — it’s the most romantic thing I know.”

“You mean his idea for his native place?”

“Yes — the collection, the Museum with which he wishes to endow it, and of which he thinks more, as you know, than of anything in the world. It’s the work of his life and the motive of everything he does.”

The young man, in his actual mood, could have smiled again — smiled delicately, as he had then smiled at her. “Has it been his motive in letting me have you?”

“Yes, my dear, positively — or in a manner,” she had said.

“American City isn’t, by the way, his native town, for, though he’s not old, it’s a young thing compared with him — a younger one. He started there, he has a feeling about it, and the place has grown, as he says, like the programme of a charity performance. You’re at any rate a part of his collection,” she had explained— “one of the things that can only be got over here. You’re a rarity, an object of beauty, an object of price. You’re not perhaps absolutely unique, but you’re so curious and eminent that there are very few others like you — you belong to a class about which everything is known. You’re what they call a morceau de musee.”

"I see. I have the great sign of it," he had risked— "that I cost a lot of money."

"I haven't the least idea," she had gravely answered, "what you cost" — and he had quite adored, for the moment, her way of saying it. He had felt even, for the moment, vulgar. But he had made the best of that. "Wouldn't you find out if it were a question of parting with me? My value would in that case be estimated."

She had looked at him with her charming eyes, as if his value were well before her. "Yes, if you mean that I'd pay rather than lose you."

And then there came again what this had made him say. "Don't talk about ME — it's you who are not of this age. You're a creature of a braver and finer one, and the cinquecento, at its most golden hour, wouldn't have been ashamed of you. It would of me, and if I didn't know some of the pieces your father has acquired, I should rather fear, for American City, the criticism of experts. Would it at all events be your idea," he had then just ruefully asked, "to send me there for safety?"

"Well, we may have to come to it."

"I'll go anywhere you want."

"We must see first — it will be only if we have to come to it. There are things," she had gone on, "that father puts away — the bigger and more cumbrous of course, which he stores, has already stored in masses, here and in Paris, in Italy, in Spain, in warehouses, vaults, banks, safes, wonderful secret places. We've been like a pair of pirates — positively stage pirates, the sort who wink at each other and say 'Ha-ha!' when they come to where their treasure is buried. Ours is buried pretty well everywhere — except what we like to see, what we travel with and have about us. These, the smaller pieces, are the things we take out and arrange as we can, to make the hotels we stay at and the houses we hire a little less ugly. Of course it's a danger, and we have to keep watch. But father loves a fine piece, loves, as he says, the good of it, and it's for the company of some of his things that he's willing to run his risks. And we've had extraordinary luck" — Maggie had made that point; "we've never lost anything yet. And the finest objects are often the smallest. Values, in lots of cases, you must know, have nothing to do with size. But there's nothing, however tiny," she had wound up, "that we've missed."

"I like the class," he had laughed for this, "in which you place me! I shall be one of the little pieces that you unpack at the hotels, or at the worst in the hired houses, like this wonderful one, and put out with the family photographs and the new magazines. But it's something not to be so big that I have to be buried."

"Oh," she had returned, "you shall not be buried, my dear, till you're dead. Unless indeed you call it burial to go to American City."

"Before I pronounce I should like to see my tomb." So he had had, after his fashion, the last word in their interchange, save for the result of an observation that had risen to his lips at the beginning, which he had then checked, and which now came back to him. "Good, bad or indifferent, I hope there's one thing you believe about me."

He had sounded solemn, even to himself, but she had taken it gaily. "Ah, don't fix me down to 'one'! I believe things enough about you, my dear, to have a few left if most of them, even, go to smash. I've taken care of THAT. I've divided my faith into water-tight compartments. We must manage not to sink."

"You do believe I'm not a hypocrite? You recognise that I don't lie or dissemble or deceive? Is THAT water-tight?"

The question, to which he had given a certain intensity, had made her, he remembered, stare an instant, her colour rising as if it had sounded to her still stranger than he had intended. He had perceived on the spot that any SERIOUS discussion of veracity, of loyalty, or rather of the want of them, practically took her unprepared, as if it were quite new to her. He had noticed it before: it was the English, the American sign that duplicity, like "love," had to be joked about. It couldn't be "gone into." So the note of his inquiry was — well, to call it nothing else — premature; a mistake worth making, however, for the almost overdone drollery in which her answer instinctively sought refuge.

"Water-tight — the biggest compartment of all? Why, it's the best cabin and the main deck and the engine-room and the steward's pantry! It's the ship itself — it's the whole line. It's the captain's table and all one's luggage — one's reading for the trip." She had images, like that, that were drawn from steamers and trains, from a familiarity with "lines," a command of "own" cars, from an experience of continents and seas, that he was unable as yet to emulate; from vast modern machineries and facilities whose acquaintance he had still to make, but as to which it was part of the interest of his situation as it stood that he could, quite without wincing, feel his future likely to bristle with them.

It was in fact, content as he was with his engagement and charming as he thought his affianced bride, his view of THAT furniture that mainly constituted our young man's "romance" — and to an extent that made of his inward state a contrast that he was intelligent enough to feel. He was intelligent enough to feel quite humble, to wish not to be in the least hard or voracious, not to insist on his own side of the bargain, to warn himself in short against arrogance and greed. Odd enough, of a truth, was his sense of this last danger — which may illustrate moreover his general attitude toward dangers from within. Personally, he considered, he hadn't the vices in question — and that was so much to the good. His race, on the other hand, had had them handsomely enough, and he was somehow full of his race. Its presence in him was like the consciousness of some inexpugnable scent in which his clothes, his whole person, his hands and the hair of his head, might have been steeped as in some chemical bath: the effect was nowhere in particular, yet he constantly felt himself at the mercy of the cause. He knew his antenatal history, knew it in every detail, and it was a thing to keep causes well before him. What was his frank judgment of so much of its ugliness, he asked himself, but a part of the cultivation of humility? What was this so important step he had just taken but the desire for some new history that should, so far as possible, contradict, and even if need be flatly dishonour, the old? If what had come to him wouldn't do he must MAKE something different. He perfectly recognised — always in his humility — that the material for the making had to be Mr. Verver's millions. There was nothing else for him on earth to make it with; he had tried before — had had to look about and see the truth. Humble as he was, at the same time, he was not so humble as if he had known himself frivolous or stupid. He had an idea — which may amuse his historian — that when you were stupid enough to be mistaken about such a matter you did know it. Therefore he wasn't mistaken — his future might be MIGHT be scientific. There was nothing in himself, at all events, to prevent it. He was allying himself to science, for what was science but the absence of prejudice backed by the presence of money? His life would be full of machinery, which was the antidote to superstition, which was in its turn, too much, the consequence, or at least the exhalation, of archives. He thought of these — of his not being at all events futile, and of his absolute acceptance of the developments of the coming age to redress the balance of his being so differently considered. The moments when he most winced were those at which he found himself believing that, really, futility would have been forgiven him. Even WITH it, in that absurd view, he would have been good enough. Such was the laxity, in the Ververs, of the romantic spirit. They didn't, indeed, poor dears, know what, in that line — the line of futility — the real thing meant. HE did — having seen it, having tried it, having taken its measure. This was a memory in fact simply to screen out — much as, just in front of him while he walked, the iron shutter of a shop, closing early to the stale summer day, rattled down at the turn of some crank. There was machinery again, just as the plate glass, all about him, was money, was power, the power of the rich peoples. Well, he was OF them now, of the rich peoples; he was on their side — if it wasn't rather the pleasanter way of putting it that they were on his.

Something of this sort was in any case the moral and the murmur of his walk. It would have been ridiculous — such a moral from such a source — if it hadn't all somehow fitted to the gravity of the hour, that gravity the oppression of which I began by recording. Another feature was the immediate nearness of the arrival of the contingent from home. He was to meet them at Charing Cross on the morrow: his younger brother, who had married before him, but whose wife, of Hebrew race, with a portion that had gilded the pill, was not in a condition to travel; his sister and her husband, the most anglicised of Milanesi, his maternal uncle, the most shelved of diplomatists, and his Roman cousin, Don Ottavio, the most disponible of ex-deputies and of relatives — a scant handful of the consanguineous who, in spite of Maggie's plea for hymeneal reserve, were to accompany him to the altar. It was no great array, yet it was apparently to be a more numerous muster than any possible to the bride herself, having no wealth of kinship to choose from and making it up, on the other hand, by loose invitations. He had been interested in the girl's attitude on the matter and had wholly deferred to it, giving him, as it did, a glimpse, distinctly pleasing, of the kind of ruminations she would in general be governed by — which were quite such as fell in with his own taste. They hadn't natural relations, she and her father, she had explained; so they wouldn't try to supply the place by artificial, by make-believe ones, by any searching of highways and hedges. Oh yes, they had acquaintances enough — but a marriage was an intimate thing. You asked acquaintances when you HAD your kith and kin — you asked them over and above. But you didn't ask them alone, to cover your nudity and look like what they weren't. She knew what she meant and what she liked, and he was all ready to take from her, finding a good omen in both of the facts. He expected her, desired her, to have character; his wife SHOULD have it, and he wasn't afraid of her having much. He had had, in his earlier time, to deal with plenty of people who

had had it; notably with the three four ecclesiastics, his great-uncle, the Cardinal, above all, who had taken a hand and played a part in his education: the effect of all of which had never been to upset him. He was thus fairly on the look-out for the characteristic in this most intimate, as she was to come, of his associates. He encouraged it when it appeared.

He felt therefore, just at present, as if his papers were in order, as if his accounts so balanced as they had never done in his life before and he might close the portfolio with a snap. It would open again, doubtless, of itself, with the arrival of the Romans; it would even perhaps open with his dining to-night in Portland Place, where Mr. Verver had pitched a tent suggesting that of Alexander furnished with the spoils of Darius. But what meanwhile marked his crisis, as I have said, was his sense of the immediate two or three hours. He paused on corners, at crossings; there kept rising for him, in waves, that consciousness, sharp as to its source while vague as to its end, which I began by speaking of — the consciousness of an appeal to do something or other, before it was too late, for himself. By any friend to whom he might have mentioned it the appeal could have been turned to frank derision. For what, for whom indeed but himself and the high advantages attached, was he about to marry an extraordinarily charming girl, whose "prospects," of the solid sort, were as guaranteed as her amiability? He wasn't to do it, assuredly, all for her. The Prince, as happened, however, was so free to feel and yet not to formulate that there rose before him after a little, definitely, the image of a friend whom he had often found ironic. He withheld the tribute of attention from passing faces only to let his impulse accumulate. Youth and beauty made him scarcely turn, but the image of Mrs. Assingham made him presently stop a hansom. HER youth, her beauty were things more or less of the past, but to find her at home, as he possibly might, would be "doing" what he still had time for, would put something of a reason into his restlessness and thereby probably soothe it. To recognise the propriety of this particular pilgrimage — she lived far enough off, in long Cadogan Place — was already in fact to work it off a little. A perception of the propriety of formally thanking her, and of timing the act just as he happened to be doing — this, he made out as he went, was obviously all that had been the matter with him. It was true that he had mistaken the mood of the moment, misread it rather, superficially, as an impulse to look the other way — the other way from where his pledges had accumulated. Mrs. Assingham, precisely, represented, embodied his pledges — was, in her pleasant person, the force that had set them successively in motion. She had MADE his marriage, quite as truly as his papal ancestor had made his family — though he could scarce see what she had made it for unless because she too was perversely romantic. He had neither bribed nor persuaded her, had given her nothing — scarce even till now articulate thanks; so that her profit-to think of it vulgarly — must have all had to come from the Ververs.

Yet he was far, he could still remind himself, from supposing that she had been grossly remunerated. He was wholly sure she hadn't; for if there were people who took presents and people who didn't she would be quite on the right side and of the proud class. Only then, on the other hand, her disinterestedness was rather awful — it implied, that is, such abysses of confidence. She was admirably attached to Maggie — whose possession of such a friend might moreover quite rank as one of her "assets"; but the great proof of her affection had been in bringing them, with her design, together. Meeting him during a winter in Rome, meeting him afterwards in Paris, and "liking" him, as she had in time frankly let him know from the first, she had marked him for her young friend's own and had then, unmistakably, presented him in a light. But the interest in Maggie — that was the point — would have achieved but little without her interest in HIM. On what did that sentiment, unsolicited and unrecompensed, rest? what good, again — for it was much like his question about Mr. Verver — should he ever have done her? The Prince's notion of a recompense to women — similar in this to his notion of an appeal — was more or less to make love to them. Now he hadn't, as he believed, made love the least little bit to Mrs. Assingham — nor did he think she had for a moment supposed it. He liked in these days, to mark them off, the women to whom he hadn't made love: it represented — and that was what pleased him in it — a different stage of existence from the time at which he liked to mark off the women to whom he had. Neither, with all this, had Mrs. Assingham herself been either aggressive or resentful. On what occasion, ever, had she appeared to find him wanting? These things, the motives of such people, were obscure — a little alarmingly so; they contributed to that element of the impenetrable which alone slightly qualified his sense of his good fortune. He remembered to have read, as a boy, a wonderful tale by Allan Poe, his prospective wife's countryman-which was a thing to show, by the way, what imagination Americans COULD have: the story of the shipwrecked Gordon Pym, who, drifting in a small boat further toward the North Pole — or was it the South? — than anyone had ever done, found at a given moment before

him a thickness of white air that was like a dazzling curtain of light, concealing as darkness conceals, yet of the colour of milk or of snow. There were moments when he felt his own boat move upon some such mystery. The state of mind of his new friends, including Mrs. Assingham herself, had resemblances to a great white curtain. He had never known curtains but as purple even to blackness — but as producing where they hung a darkness intended and ominous. When they were so disposed as to shelter surprises the surprises were apt to be shocks.

Shocks, however, from these quite different depths, were not what he saw reason to apprehend; what he rather seemed to himself not yet to have measured was something that, seeking a name for it, he would have called the quantity of confidence reposed in him. He had stood still, at many a moment of the previous month, with the thought, freshly determined or renewed, of the general expectation — to define it roughly — of which he was the subject. What was singular was that it seemed not so much an expectation of anything in particular as a large, bland, blank assumption of merits almost beyond notation, of essential quality and value. It was as if he had been some old embossed coin, of a purity of gold no longer used, stamped with glorious arms, mediaeval, wonderful, of which the "worth" in mere modern change, sovereigns and half crowns, would be great enough, but as to which, since there were finer ways of using it, such taking to pieces was superfluous. That was the image for the security in which it was open to him to rest; he was to constitute a possession, yet was to escape being reduced to his component parts. What would this mean but that, practically, he was never to be tried or tested? What would it mean but that, if they didn't "change" him, they really wouldn't know — he wouldn't know himself — how many pounds, shillings and pence he had to give? These at any rate, for the present, were unanswerable questions; all that was before him was that he was invested with attributes. He was taken seriously. Lost there in the white mist was the seriousness in them that made them so take him. It was even in Mrs. Assingham, in spite of her having, as she had frequently shown, a more mocking spirit. All he could say as yet was that he had done nothing, so far as to break any charm. What should he do if he were to ask her frankly this afternoon what was, morally speaking, behind their veil. It would come to asking what they expected him to do. She would answer him probably: "Oh, you know, it's what we expect you to be!" on which he would have no resource but to deny his knowledge. Would that break the spell, his saying he had no idea? What idea in fact could he have? He also took himself seriously — made a point of it; but it wasn't simply a question of fancy and pretension. His own estimate he saw ways, at one time and another, of dealing with: but theirs, sooner or later, say what they might, would put him to the practical proof. As the practical proof, accordingly, would naturally be proportionate to the cluster of his attributes, one arrived at a scale that he was not, honestly, the man to calculate. Who but a billionaire could say what was fair exchange for a billion? That measure was the shrouded object, but he felt really, as his cab stopped in Cadogan Place, a little nearer the shroud. He promised himself, virtually, to give the latter a twitch.

II

"They're not good days, you know," he had said to Fanny Assingham after declaring himself grateful for finding her, and then, with his cup of tea, putting her in possession of the latest news — the documents signed an hour ago, de part et d'autre, and the telegram from his backers, who had reached Paris the morning before, and who, pausing there a little, poor dears, seemed to think the whole thing a tremendous lark. "We're very simple folk, mere country cousins compared with you," he had also observed, "and Paris, for my sister and her husband, is the end of the world. London therefore will be more or less another planet. It has always been, as with so many of us, quite their Mecca, but this is their first real caravan; they've mainly known 'old England' as a shop for articles in india-rubber and leather, in which they've dressed themselves as much as possible. Which all means, however, that you'll see them, all of them, wreathed in smiles. We must be very easy with them. Maggie's too wonderful — her preparations are on a scale! She insists on taking in the sposi and my uncle. The others will come to me. I've been engaging their rooms at the hotel, and, with all those solemn signatures of an hour ago, that brings the case home to me."

"Do you mean you're afraid?" his hostess had amusedly asked.

"Terribly afraid. I've now but to wait to see the monster come. They're not good days; they're neither one thing nor the other. I've really got nothing, yet I've everything to lose. One doesn't know what still may happen."

The way she laughed at him was for an instant almost irritating; it came out, for his fancy, from behind the white curtain. It was a sign, that is, of her deep serenity, which worried instead of soothing him. And to be soothed, after all, to be tided over, in his mystic impatience, to be told what he could understand and believe — that was what he had come for. "Marriage then," said Mrs. Assingham, "is what you call the monster? I admit it's a fearful thing at the best; but, for heaven's sake, if that's what you're thinking of, don't run away from it."

"Ah, to run away from it would be to run away from you," the Prince replied; "and I've already told you often enough how I depend on you to see me through." He so liked the way she took this, from the corner of her sofa, that he gave his sincerity — for it WAS sincerity — fuller expression. "I'm starting on the great voyage — across the unknown sea; my ship's all rigged and appointed, the cargo's stowed away and the company complete. But what seems the matter with me is that I can't sail alone; my ship must be one of a pair, must have, in the waste of waters, a — what do you call it? — a consort. I don't ask you to stay on board with me, but I must keep your sail in sight for orientation. I don't in the least myself know, I assure you, the points of the compass. But with a lead I can perfectly follow. You MUST be my lead."

"How can you be sure," she asked, "where I should take you?"

"Why, from your having brought me safely thus far. I should never have got here without you. You've provided the ship itself, and, if you've not quite seen me aboard, you've attended me, ever so kindly, to the dock. Your own vessel is, all conveniently, in the next berth, and you can't desert me now."

She showed him again her amusement, which struck him even as excessive, as if, to his surprise, he made her also a little nervous; she treated him in fine as if he were not uttering truths, but making pretty figures for her diversion. "My vessel, dear Prince?" she smiled. "What vessel, in the world, have I? This little house is all our ship, Bob's and mine — and thankful we are, now, to have it. We've wandered far, living, as you may say, from hand to mouth, without rest for the soles of our feet. But the time has come for us at last to draw in."

He made at this, the young man, an indignant protest. "You talk about rest — it's too selfish! — when you're just launching me on adventures?"

She shook her head with her kind lucidity. "Not adventures — heaven forbid! You've had yours — as I've had mine; and my idea has been, all along, that we should neither of us begin again. My own last, precisely, has been doing for you all you so prettily mention. But it consists simply in having conducted you to rest. You talk about ships, but they're not the comparison. Your tossings are over — you're practically IN port. The port," she concluded, "of the Golden Isles."

He looked about, to put himself more in relation with the place; then, after an hesitation, seemed to speak certain words instead of certain others. "Oh, I know where I AM — ! I do decline to be left, but what I came for, of course, was to thank you. If to-day has seemed, for the first time, the end of preliminaries, I feel how

little there would have been any at all without you. The first were wholly yours."

"Well," said Mrs. Assingham, "they were remarkably easy. I've seen them, I've HAD them," she smiled, "more difficult. Everything, you must feel, went of itself. So, you must feel, everything still goes."

The Prince quickly agreed. "Oh, beautifully! But you had the conception."

"Ah, Prince, so had you!"

He looked at her harder a moment. "You had it first. You had it most."

She returned his look as if it had made her wonder. "I LIKED it, if that's what you mean. But you liked it surely yourself. I protest, that I had easy work with you. I had only at last — when I thought it was time — to speak for you."

"All that is quite true. But you're leaving me, all the same, you're leaving me — you're washing your hands of me," he went on. "However, that won't be easy; I won't BE left." And he had turned his eyes about again, taking in the pretty room that she had just described as her final refuge, the place of peace for a world-worn couple, to which she had lately retired with "Bob." "I shall keep this spot in sight. Say what you will, I shall need you. I'm not, you know," he declared, "going to give you up for anybody."

"If you're afraid — which of course you're not — are you trying to make me the same?" she asked after a moment.

He waited a minute too, then answered her with a question. "You say you 'liked' it, your undertaking to make my engagement possible. It remains beautiful for me that you did; it's charming and unforgettable. But, still more, it's mysterious and wonderful. WHY, you dear delightful woman, did you like it?"

"I scarce know what to make," she said, "of such an inquiry. If you haven't by this time found out yourself, what meaning can anything I say have for you? Don't you really after all feel," she added while nothing came from him— "aren't you conscious every minute, of the perfection of the creature of whom I've put you into possession?"

"Every minute — gratefully conscious. But that's exactly the ground of my question. It wasn't only a matter of your handing me over — it was a matter of your handing her. It was a matter of HER fate still more than of mine. You thought all the good of her that one woman can think of another, and yet, by your account, you enjoyed assisting at her risk."

She had kept her eyes on him while he spoke, and this was what, visibly, determined a repetition for her. "Are you trying to frighten me?"

"Ah, that's a foolish view — I should be too vulgar. You apparently can't understand either my good faith or my humility. I'm awfully humble," the young man insisted; "that's the way I've been feeling to-day, with everything so finished and ready. And you won't take me for serious."

She continued to face him as if he really troubled her a little. "Oh, you deep old Italians!"

"There you are," he returned— "it's what I wanted you to come to. That's the responsible note."

"Yes," she went on— "if you're 'humble' you MUST be dangerous."

She had a pause while he only smiled; then she said: "I don't in the least want to lose sight of you. But even if I did I shouldn't think it right."

"Thank you for that — it's what I needed of you. I'm sure, after all, that the more you're with me the more I shall understand. It's the only thing in the world I want. I'm excellent, I really think, all round — except that I'm stupid. I can do pretty well anything I SEE. But I've got to see it first." And he pursued his demonstration. "I don't in the least mind its having to be shown me — in fact I like that better. Therefore it is that I want, that I shall always want, your eyes. Through THEM I wish to look — even at any risk of their showing me what I mayn't like. For then," he wound up, "I shall know. And of that I shall never be afraid."

She might quite have been waiting to see what he would come to, but she spoke with a certain impatience. "What on earth are you talking about?"

But he could perfectly say: "Of my real, honest fear of being 'off' some day, of being wrong, WITHOUT knowing it. That's what I shall always trust you for — to tell me when I am. No — with you people it's a sense. We haven't got it — not as you have. Therefore — !" But he had said enough. "Ecco!" he simply smiled.

It was not to be concealed that he worked upon her, but of course she had always liked him. "I should be interested," she presently remarked, "to see some sense you don't possess."

Well, he produced one on the spot. "The moral, dear Mrs. Assingham. I mean, always, as you others consider it. I've of course something that in our poor dear backward old Rome sufficiently passes for it. But

it's no more like yours than the tortuous stone staircase — half-ruined into the bargain! — in some castle of our quattrocento is like the `lightning elevator' in one of Mr. Verver's fifteen-storey buildings. Your moral sense works by steam — it sends you up like a rocket. Ours is slow and steep and unlighted, with so many of the steps missing that — well, that it's as short, in almost any case, to turn round and come down again."

"Trusting," Mrs. Assingham smiled, "to get up some other way?"

"Yes — or not to have to get up at all. However," he added, "I told you that at the beginning."

"Machiavelli!" she simply exclaimed.

"You do me too much honour. I wish indeed I had his genius. However, if you really believe I have his perversity you wouldn't say it. But it's all right," he gaily enough concluded; "I shall always have you to come to."

On this, for a little, they sat face to face; after which, without comment, she asked him if he would have more tea. All she would give him, he promptly signified; and he developed, making her laugh, his idea that the tea of the English race was somehow their morality, "made," with boiling water, in a little pot, so that the more of it one drank the more moral one would become. His drollery served as a transition, and she put to him several questions about his sister and the others, questions as to what Bob, in particular, Colonel Assingham, her husband, could do for the arriving gentlemen, whom, by the Prince's leave, he would immediately go to see. He was funny, while they talked, about his own people too, whom he described, with anecdotes of their habits, imitations of their manners and prophecies of their conduct, as more rococo than anything Cadogan Place would ever have known. This, Mrs. Assingham professed, was exactly what would endear them to her, and that, in turn, drew from her visitor a fresh declaration of all the comfort of his being able so to depend on her. He had been with her, at this point, some twenty minutes; but he had paid her much longer visits, and he stayed now as if to make his attitude prove his appreciation. He stayed moreover — THAT was really the sign of the hour — in spite of the nervous unrest that had brought him and that had in truth much rather fed on the scepticism by which she had apparently meant to soothe it. She had not soothed him, and there arrived, remarkably, a moment when the cause of her failure gleamed out. He had not frightened her, as she called it — he felt that; yet she was herself not at ease. She had been nervous, though trying to disguise it; the sight of him, following on the announcement of his name, had shown her as disconcerted. This conviction, for the young man, deepened and sharpened; yet with the effect, too, of making him glad in spite of it. It was as if, in calling, he had done even better than he intended. For it was somehow IMPORTANT — that was what it was — that there should be at this hour something the matter with Mrs. Assingham, with whom, in all their acquaintance, so considerable now, there had never been the least little thing the matter. To wait thus and watch for it was to know, of a truth, that there was something the matter with HIM; since strangely, with so little to go upon — his heart had positively begun to beat to the tune of suspense. It fairly befell at last, for a climax, that they almost ceased to pretend — to pretend, that is, to cheat each other with forms. The unspoken had come up, and there was a crisis — neither could have said how long it lasted — during which they were reduced, for all interchange, to looking at each other on quite an inordinate scale. They might at this moment, in their positively portentous stillness, have been keeping it up for a wager, sitting for their photograph or even enacting a tableau-vivant.

The spectator of whom they would thus well have been worthy might have read meanings of his own into the intensity of their communion — or indeed, even without meanings, have found his account, aesthetically, in some gratified play of our modern sense of type, so scantly to be distinguished from our modern sense of beauty. Type was there, at the worst, in Mrs. Assingham's dark, neat head, on which the crisp black hair made waves so fine and so numerous that she looked even more in the fashion of the hour than she desired. Full of discriminations against the obvious, she had yet to accept a flagrant appearance and to make the best of misleading signs. Her richness of hue, her generous nose, her eyebrows marked like those of an actress — these things, with an added amplitude of person on which middle age had set its seal, seemed to present her insistently as a daughter of the south, or still more of the east, a creature formed by hammocks and divans, fed upon sherbets and waited upon by slaves. She looked as if her most active effort might be to take up, as she lay back, her mandolin, or to share a sugared fruit with a pet gazelle. She was in fact, however, neither a pampered Jewess nor a lazy Creole; New York had been, recordedly, her birthplace and "Europe" punctually her discipline. She wore yellow and purple because she thought it better, as she said, while one was about it, to look like the Queen of Sheba than like a revendeuse; she put pearls in her hair and crimson and gold in her tea-gown for the same reason: it was her theory that nature itself had overdressed her and that her only course

was to drown, as it was hopeless to try to chasten, the overdressing. So she was covered and surrounded with "things," which were frankly toys and shams, a part of the amusement with which she rejoiced to supply her friends. These friends were in the game that of playing with the disparity between her aspect and her character. Her character was attested by the second movement of her face, which convinced the beholder that her vision of the humours of the world was not supine, not passive. She enjoyed, she needed the warm air of friendship, but the eyes of the American city looked out, somehow, for the opportunity of it, from under the lids of Jerusalem. With her false indolence, in short, her false leisure, her false pearls and palms and courts and fountains, she was a person for whom life was multitudinous detail, detail that left her, as it at any moment found her, unappalled and unwearied.

"Sophisticated as I may appear" — it was her frequent phrase — she had found sympathy her best resource. It gave her plenty to do; it made her, as she also said, sit up. She had in her life two great holes to fill, and she described herself as dropping social scraps into them as she had known old ladies, in her early American time, drop morsels of silk into the baskets in which they collected the material for some eventual patchwork quilt.

One of these gaps in Mrs. Assingham's completeness was her want of children; the other was her want of wealth. It was wonderful how little either, in the fulness of time, came to show; sympathy and curiosity could render their objects practically filial, just as an English husband who in his military years had "run" everything in his regiment could make economy blossom like the rose. Colonel Bob had, a few years after his marriage, left the army, which had clearly, by that time, done its laudable all for the enrichment of his personal experience, and he could thus give his whole time to the gardening in question. There reigned among the younger friends of this couple a legend, almost too venerable for historical criticism, that the marriage itself, the happiest of its class, dated from the far twilight of the age, a primitive period when such things — such things as American girls accepted as "good enough" — had not begun to be; — so that the pleasant pair had been, as to the risk taken on either side, bold and original, honourably marked, for the evening of life, as discoverers of a kind of hymeneal Northwest Passage. Mrs. Assingham knew better, knew there had been no historic hour, from that of Pocahontas down, when some young Englishman hadn't precipitately believed and some American girl hadn't, with a few more gradations, availed herself to the full of her incapacity to doubt; but she accepted resignedly the laurel of the founder, since she was in fact pretty well the doyenne, above ground, of her transplanted tribe, and since, above all, she HAD invented combinations, though she had not invented Bob's own. It was he who had done that, absolutely puzzled it out, by himself, from his first odd glimmer-resting upon it moreover, through the years to come, as proof enough, in him, by itself, of the higher cleverness. If she kept her own cleverness up it was largely that he should have full credit. There were moments in truth when she privately felt how little — striking out as he had done — he could have afforded that she should show the common limits. But Mrs. Assingham's cleverness was in truth tested when her present visitor at last said to her: "I don't think, you know, that you're treating me quite right. You've something on your mind that you don't tell me."

It was positive too that her smile, in reply, was a trifle dim. "Am I obliged to tell you everything I have on my mind?"

"It isn't a question of everything, but it's a question of anything that may particularly concern me. Then you shouldn't keep it back. You know with what care I desire to proceed, taking everything into account and making no mistake that may possibly injure HER."

Mrs. Assingham, at this, had after an instant an odd interrogation. "'Her'?"

"Her and him. Both our friends. Either Maggie or her father."

"I have something on my mind," Mrs. Assingham presently returned; "something has happened for which I hadn't been prepared. But it isn't anything that properly concerns you."

The Prince, with immediate gaiety, threw back his head. "What do you mean by 'properly'? I somehow see volumes in it. It's the way people put a thing when they put it — well, wrong. *I* put things right. What is it that has happened for me?"

His hostess, the next moment, had drawn spirit from his tone.

"Oh, I shall be delighted if you'll take your share of it. Charlotte Stant is in London. She has just been here."

"Miss Stant? Oh really?" The Prince expressed clear surprise — a transparency through which his eyes met his friend's with a certain hardness of concussion. "She has arrived from America?" he then quickly

asked.

"She appears to have arrived this noon — coming up from Southampton; at an hotel. She dropped upon me after luncheon and was here for more than an hour."

The young man heard with interest, though not with an interest too great for his gaiety. "You think then I've a share in it? What IS my share?"

"Why, any you like — the one you seemed just now eager to take. It was you yourself who insisted."

He looked at her on this with conscious inconsistency, and she could now see that he had changed colour. But he was always easy.

"I didn't know then what the matter was."

"You didn't think it could be so bad?"

"Do you call it very bad?" the young man asked. "Only," she smiled, "because that's the way it seems to affect YOU."

He hesitated, still with the trace of his quickened colour, still looking at her, still adjusting his manner. "But you allowed you were upset."

"To the extent — yes — of not having in the least looked for her. Any more," said Mrs. Assingham, "than I judge Maggie to have done."

The Prince thought; then as if glad to be able to say something very natural and true: "No — quite right. Maggie hasn't looked for her. But I'm sure," he added, "she'll be delighted to see her."

"That, certainly" — and his hostess spoke with a different shade of gravity.

"She'll be quite overjoyed," the Prince went on. "Has Miss Stant now gone to her?"

"She has gone back to her hotel, to bring her things here. I can't have her," said Mrs. Assingham, "alone at an hotel."

"No; I see."

"If she's here at all she must stay with me." He quite took it in. "So she's coming now?"

"I expect her at any moment. If you wait you'll see her."

"Oh," he promptly declared— "charming!" But this word came out as if, a little, in sudden substitution for some other. It sounded accidental, whereas he wished to be firm. That accordingly was what he next showed himself. "If it wasn't for what's going on these next days Maggie would certainly want to have her. In fact," he lucidly continued, "isn't what's happening just a reason to MAKE her want to?" Mrs. Assingham, for answer, only looked at him, and this, the next instant, had apparently had more effect than if she had spoken. For he asked a question that seemed incongruous. "What has she come for!"

It made his companion laugh. "Why, for just what you say. For your marriage."

"Mine?" — he wondered.

"Maggie's — it's the same thing. It's 'for' your great event. And then," said Mrs. Assingham, "she's so lonely."

"Has she given you that as a reason?"

"I scarcely remember — she gave me so many. She abounds, poor dear, in reasons. But there's one that, whatever she does, I always remember for myself."

"And which is that?" He looked as if he ought to guess but couldn't.

"Why, the fact that she has no home — absolutely none whatever. She's extraordinarily alone."

Again he took it in. "And also has no great means."

"Very small ones. Which is not, however, with the expense of railways and hotels, a reason for her running to and fro."

"On the contrary. But she doesn't like her country."

"Hers, my dear man? — it's little enough 'hers.'" The attribution, for the moment, amused his hostess. "She has rebounded now — but she has had little enough else to do with it."

"Oh, I say hers," the Prince pleasantly explained, "very much as, at this time of day, I might say mine. I quite feel, I assure you, as if the great place already more or less belonged to ME."

"That's your good fortune and your point of view. You own — or you soon practically WILL own — so much of it. Charlotte owns almost nothing in the world, she tells me, but two colossal trunks-only one of which I have given her leave to introduce into this house. She'll depreciate to you," Mrs. Assingham added, "your property."

He thought of these things, he thought of every thing; but he had always his resource at hand of turning all

to the easy. “Has she come with designs upon me?” And then in a moment, as if even this were almost too grave, he sounded the note that had least to do with himself. “Est-elle toujours aussi belle?” That was the furthest point, somehow, to which Charlotte Stant could be relegated.

Mrs. Assingham treated it freely. “Just the same. The person in the world, to my sense, whose looks are most subject to appreciation. It’s all in the way she affects you. One admires her if one doesn’t happen not to. So, as well, one criticises her.”

“Ah, that’s not fair!” said the Prince.

“To criticise her? Then there you are! You’re answered.”

“I’m answered.” He took it, humorously, as his lesson — sank his previous self-consciousness, with excellent effect, in grateful docility. “I only meant that there are perhaps better things to be done with Miss Stant than to criticise her. When once you begin THAT, with anyone — !” He was vague and kind.

“I quite agree that it’s better to keep out of it as long as one can. But when one MUST do it—”

“Yes?” he asked as she paused. “Then know what you mean.”

“I see. Perhaps,” he smiled, “*I* don’t know what I mean.”

“Well, it’s what, just now, in all ways, you particularly should know.” Mrs. Assingham, however, made no more of this, having, before anything else, apparently, a scruple about the tone she had just used. “I quite understand, of course, that, given her great friendship with Maggie, she should have wanted to be present. She has acted impulsively — but she has acted generously.”

“She has acted beautifully,” said the Prince.

“I say ‘generously’ because I mean she hasn’t, in any way, counted the cost. She’ll have it to count, in a manner, now,” his hostess continued. “But that doesn’t matter.”

He could see how little. “You’ll look after her.”

“I’ll look after her.”

“So it’s all right.”

“It’s all right,” said Mrs. Assingham. “Then why are you troubled?”

It pulled her up — but only for a minute. “I’m not — any more than you.”

The Prince’s dark blue eyes were of the finest, and, on occasion, precisely, resembled nothing so much as the high windows of a Roman palace, of an historic front by one of the great old designers, thrown open on a feast-day to the golden air. His look itself, at such times, suggested an image — that of some very noble personage who, expected, acclaimed by the crowd in the street and with old precious stuffs falling over the sill for his support, had gaily and gallantly come to show himself: always moreover less in his own interest than in that of spectators and subjects whose need to admire, even to gape, was periodically to be considered. The young man’s expression became, after this fashion, something vivid and concrete — a beautiful personal presence, that of a prince in very truth, a ruler, warrior, patron, lighting up brave architecture and diffusing the sense of a function. It had been happily said of his face that the figure thus appearing in the great frame was the ghost of some proudest ancestor. Whoever the ancestor now, at all events, the Prince was, for Mrs. Assingham’s benefit, in view of the people. He seemed, leaning on crimson damask, to take in the bright day. He looked younger than his years; he was beautiful, innocent, vague.

“Oh, well, I’M not!” he rang out clear.

“I should like to SEE you, sir!” she said. “For you wouldn’t have a shadow of excuse.” He showed how he agreed that he would have been at a loss for one, and the fact of their serenity was thus made as important as if some danger of its opposite had directly menaced them. The only thing was that if the evidence of their cheer was so established Mrs. Assingham had a little to explain her original manner, and she came to this before they dropped the question. “My first impulse is always to behave, about everything, as if I feared complications. But I don’t fear them — I really like them. They’re quite my element.”

He deferred, for her, to this account of herself. “But still,” he said, “if we’re not in the presence of a complication.”

She hesitated. “A handsome, clever, odd girl staying with one is always a complication.”

The young man weighed it almost as if the question were new to him. “And will she stay very long?”

His friend gave a laugh. “How in the world can I know? I’ve scarcely asked her.”

“Ah yes. You can’t.”

But something in the tone of it amused her afresh. “Do you think you could?”

“I?” he wondered.

“Do you think you could get it out of her for me — the probable length of her stay?”

He rose bravely enough to the occasion and the challenge. “I daresay, if you were to give me the chance.”

“Here it is then for you,” she answered; for she had heard, within the minute, the stop of a cab at her door. “She’s back.”

III

It had been said as a joke, but as, after this, they awaited their friend in silence, the effect of the silence was to turn the time to gravity — a gravity not dissipated even when the Prince next spoke. He had been thinking the case over and making up his mind. A handsome, clever, odd girl staying with one was a complication. Mrs. Assingham, so far, was right. But there were the facts — the good relations, from schooldays, of the two young women, and the clear confidence with which one of them had arrived. "She can come, you know, at any time, to US."

Mrs. Assingham took it up with an irony beyond laughter. "You'd like her for your honeymoon?"

"Oh no, you must keep her for that. But why not after?"

She had looked at him a minute; then, at the sound of a voice in the corridor, they had got up. "Why not? You're splendid!" Charlotte Stant, the next minute, was with them, ushered in as she had alighted from her cab, and prepared for not finding Mrs. Assingham alone — this would have been to be noticed — by the butler's answer, on the stairs, to a question put to him. She could have looked at her hostess with such straightness and brightness only from knowing that the Prince was also there — the discrimination of but a moment, yet which let him take her in still better than if she had instantly faced him. He availed himself of the chance thus given him, for he was conscious of all these things. What he accordingly saw, for some seconds, with intensity, was a tall, strong, charming girl who wore for him, at first, exactly the look of her adventurous situation, a suggestion, in all her person, in motion and gesture, in free, vivid, yet altogether happy indications of dress, from the becoming compactness of her hat to the shade of tan in her shoes, of winds and waves and custom-houses, of far countries and long journeys, the knowledge of how and where and the habit, founded on experience, of not being afraid. He was aware, at the same time, that of this combination the "strongminded" note was not, as might have been apprehended, the basis; he was now sufficiently familiar with English-speaking types, he had sounded attentively enough such possibilities, for a quick vision of differences. He had, besides, his own view of this young lady's strength of mind. It was great, he had ground to believe, but it would never interfere with the play of her extremely personal, her always amusing taste. This last was the thing in her — for she threw it out positively, on the spot, like a light — that she might have reappeared, during these moments, just to cool his worried eyes with. He saw her in her light that immediate, exclusive address to their friend was like a lamp she was holding aloft for his benefit and for his pleasure. It showed him everything — above all her presence in the world, so closely, so irretrievably contemporaneous with his own: a sharp, sharp fact, sharper during these instants than any other at all, even than that of his marriage, but accompanied, in a subordinate and controlled way, with those others, facial, physiognomic, that Mrs. Assingham had been speaking of as subject to appreciation. So they were, these others, as he met them again, and that was the connection they instantly established with him. If they had to be interpreted, this made at least for intimacy. There was but one way certainly for HIM — to interpret them in the sense of the already known.

Making use then of clumsy terms of excess, the face was too narrow and too long, the eyes not large, and the mouth, on the other hand, by no means small, with substance in its lips and a slight, the very slightest, tendency to protrusion in the solid teeth, otherwise indeed well arrayed and flashingly white. But it was, strangely, as a cluster of possessions of his own that these things, in Charlotte Stant, now affected him; items in a full list, items recognised, each of them, as if, for the long interval, they had been "stored" wrapped up, numbered, put away in a cabinet. While she faced Mrs. Assingham the door of the cabinet had opened of itself; he took the relics out, one by one, and it was more and more, each instant, as if she were giving him time. He saw again that her thick hair was, vulgarly speaking, brown, but that there was a shade of tawny autumn leaf in it, for "appreciation" — a colour indescribable and of which he had known no other case, something that gave her at moments the sylvan head of a huntress. He saw the sleeves of her jacket drawn to her wrists, but he again made out the free arms within them to be of the completely rounded, the polished slimness that Florentine sculptors, in the great time, had loved, and of which the apparent firmness is expressed in their old silver and old bronze. He knew her narrow hands, he knew her long fingers and the shape and colour of her finger-nails, he knew her special beauty of movement and line when she turned her back, and the perfect working of all her main attachments, that of some wonderful finished instrument, something intently made for exhibition, for a prize. He knew above all the extraordinary fineness of her

flexible waist, the stem of an expanded flower, which gave her a likeness also to some long, loose silk purse, well filled with gold pieces, but having been passed, empty, through a finger-ring that held it together. It was as if, before she turned to him, he had weighed the whole thing in his open palm and even heard a little the chink of the metal. When she did turn to him it was to recognise with her eyes what he might have been doing. She made no circumstance of thus coming upon him, save so far as the intelligence in her face could at any moment make a circumstance of almost anything. If when she moved off she looked like a huntress, she looked when she came nearer like his notion, perhaps not wholly correct, of a muse. But what she said was simply: "You see you're not rid of me. How is dear Maggie?"

It was to come soon enough by the quite unforced operation of chance, the young man's opportunity to ask her the question suggested by Mrs. Assingham shortly before her entrance. The license, had he chosen to embrace it, was within a few minutes all there — the license given him literally to inquire of this young lady how long she was likely to be with them. For a matter of the mere domestic order had quickly determined, on Mrs. Assingham's part, a withdrawal, of a few moments, which had the effect of leaving her visitors free. "Mrs. Betterman's there?" she had said to Charlotte in allusion to some member of the household who was to have received her and seen her belongings settled; to which Charlotte had replied that she had encountered only the butler, who had been quite charming. She had deprecated any action taken on behalf of her effects; but her hostess, rebounding from accumulated cushions, evidently saw more in Mrs. Betterman's non-appearance than could meet the casual eye. What she saw, in short, demanded her intervention, in spite of an earnest "Let ME go!" from the girl, and a prolonged smiling wail over the trouble she was giving. The Prince was quite aware, at this moment, that departure, for himself, was indicated; the question of Miss Stant's installation didn't demand his presence; it was a case for one to go away — if one hadn't a reason for staying. He had a reason, however — of that he was equally aware; and he had not for a good while done anything more conscious and intentional than not, quickly, to take leave. His visible insistence — for it came to that — even demanded of him a certain disagreeable effort, the sort of effort he had mostly associated with acting for an idea. His idea was there, his idea was to find out something, something he wanted much to know, and to find it out not tomorrow, not at some future time, not in short with waiting and wondering, but if possible before quitting the place. This particular curiosity, moreover, confounded itself a little with the occasion offered him to satisfy Mrs. Assingham's own; he wouldn't have admitted that he was staying to ask a rude question — there was distinctly nothing rude in his having his reasons. It would be rude, for that matter, to turn one's back, without a word or two, on an old friend.

Well, as it came to pass, he got the word or two, for Mrs. Assingham's preoccupation was practically simplifying. The little crisis was of shorter duration than our account of it; duration, naturally, would have forced him to take up his hat. He was somehow glad, on finding himself alone with Charlotte, that he had not been guilty of that inconsequence. Not to be flurried was the kind of consistency he wanted, just as consistency was the kind of dignity. And why couldn't he have dignity when he had so much of the good conscience, as it were, on which such advantages rested? He had done nothing he oughtn't — he had in fact done nothing at all. Once more, as a man conscious of having known many women, he could assist, as he would have called it, at the recurrent, the predestined phenomenon, the thing always as certain as sunrise or the coming round of Saints' days, the doing by the woman of the thing that gave her away. She did it, ever, inevitably, infallibly — she couldn't possibly not do it. It was her nature, it was her life, and the man could always expect it without lifting a finger. This was HIS, the man's, any man's, position and strength — that he had necessarily the advantage, that he only had to wait, with a decent patience, to be placed, in spite of himself, it might really be said, in the right. Just so the punctuality of performance on the part of the other creature was her weakness and her deep misfortune — not less, no doubt, than her beauty. It produced for the man that extraordinary mixture of pity and profit in which his relation with her, when he was not a mere brute, mainly consisted; and gave him in fact his most pertinent ground of being always nice to her, nice about her, nice FOR her. She always dressed her act up, of course, she muffled and disguised and arranged it, showing in fact in these dissimulations a cleverness equal to but one thing in the world, equal to her abjection: she would let it be known for anything, for everything, but the truth of which it was made. That was what, precisely, Charlotte Stant would be doing now; that was the present motive and support, to a certainty, of each of her looks and motions. She was the twentieth woman, she was possessed by her doom, but her doom was also to arrange appearances, and what now concerned him was to learn how she proposed. He would help her, would arrange WITH her to any point in reason; the only thing was to know what appearance could best

be produced and best be preserved. Produced and preserved on her part of course; since on his own there had been luckily no folly to cover up, nothing but a perfect accord between conduct and obligation.

They stood there together, at all events, when the door had closed behind their friend, with a conscious, strained smile and very much as if each waited for the other to strike the note or give the pitch. The young man held himself, in his silent suspense — only not more afraid because he felt her own fear. She was afraid of herself, however; whereas, to his gain of lucidity, he was afraid only of her. Would she throw herself into his arms, or would she be otherwise wonderful? She would see what he would do — so their queer minute without words told him; and she would act accordingly. But what could he do but just let her see that he would make anything, everything, for her, as honourably easy as possible? Even if she should throw herself into his arms he would make that easy — easy, that is, to overlook, to ignore, not to remember, and not, by the same token, either, to regret. This was not what in fact happened, though it was also not at a single touch, but by the finest gradations, that his tension subsided. "It's too delightful to be back!" she said at last; and it was all she definitely gave him — being moreover nothing but what anyone else might have said. Yet with two or three other things that, on his response, followed it, it quite pointed the path, while the tone of it, and her whole attitude, were as far removed as need have been from the truth of her situation. The abjection that was present to him as of the essence quite failed to peep out, and he soon enough saw that if she was arranging she could be trusted to arrange. Good — it was all he asked; and all the more that he could admire and like her for it.

The particular appearance she would, as they said, go in for was that of having no account whatever to give him — it would be in fact that of having none to give anybody — of reasons or of motives, of comings or of goings. She was a charming young woman who had met him before, but she was also a charming young woman with a life of her own. She would take it high — up, up, up, ever so high. Well then, he would do the same; no height would be too great for them, not even the dizziest conceivable to a young person so subtle. The dizziest seemed indeed attained when, after another moment, she came as near as she was to come to an apology for her abruptness.

"I've been thinking of Maggie, and at last I yearned for her. I wanted to see her happy — and it doesn't strike me I find you too shy to tell me I SHALL."

"Of course she's happy, thank God! Only it's almost terrible, you know, the happiness of young, good, generous creatures. It rather frightens one. But the Blessed Virgin and all the Saints," said the Prince, "have her in their keeping."

"Certainly they have. She's the dearest of the dear. But I needn't tell you," the girl added.

"Ah," he returned with gravity, "I feel that I've still much to learn about her." To which he subjoined "She'll rejoice awfully in your being with us."

"Oh, you don't need me!" Charlotte smiled. "It's her hour. It's a great hour. One has seen often enough, with girls, what it is. But that," she said, "is exactly why. Why I've wanted, I mean, not to miss it."

He bent on her a kind, comprehending face. "You mustn't miss anything." He had got it, the pitch, and he could keep it now, for all he had needed was to have it given him. The pitch was the happiness of his wife that was to be — the sight of that happiness as a joy for an old friend. It was, yes, magnificent, and not the less so for its coming to him, suddenly, as sincere, as nobly exalted. Something in Charlotte's eyes seemed to tell him this, seemed to plead with him in advance as to what he was to find in it. He was eager — and he tried to show her that too — to find what she liked; mindful as he easily could be of what the friendship had been for Maggie. It had been armed with the wings of young imagination, young generosity; it had been, he believed — always counting out her intense devotion to her father — the liveliest emotion she had known before the dawn of the sentiment inspired by himself. She had not, to his knowledge, invited the object of it to their wedding, had not thought of proposing to her, for a matter of a couple of hours, an arduous and expensive journey. But she had kept her connected and informed, from week to week, in spite of preparations and absorptions. "Oh, I've been writing to Charlotte — I wish you knew her better:" he could still hear, from recent weeks, this record of the fact, just as he could still be conscious, not otherwise than queerly, of the gratuitous element in Maggie's wish, which he had failed as yet to indicate to her. Older and perhaps more intelligent, at any rate, why shouldn't Charlotte respond — and be quite FREE to respond — to such fidelities with something more than mere formal good manners? The relations of women with each other were of the strangest, it was true, and he probably wouldn't have trusted here a young person of his own race. He was proceeding throughout on the ground of the immense difference — difficult indeed as it might have been to

disembroil in this young person HER race-quality. Nothing in her definitely placed her; she was a rare, a special product. Her singleness, her solitude, her want of means, that is her want of ramifications and other advantages, contributed to enrich her somehow with an odd, precious neutrality, to constitute for her, so detached yet so aware, a sort of small social capital. It was the only one she had — it was the only one a lonely, gregarious girl COULD have, since few, surely, had in anything like the same degree arrived at it, and since this one indeed had compassed it but through the play of some gift of nature to which you could scarce give a definite name.

It wasn't a question of her strange sense for tongues, with which she juggled as a conjuror at a show juggled with balls or hoops or lighted brands — it wasn't at least entirely that, for he had known people almost as polyglot whom their accomplishment had quite failed to make interesting. He was polyglot himself, for that matter — as was the case too with so many of his friends and relations; for none of whom, more than for himself, was it anything but a common convenience. The point was that in this young woman it was a beauty in itself, and almost a mystery: so, certainly, he had more than once felt in noting, on her lips, that rarest, among the Barbarians, of all civil graces, a perfect felicity in the use of Italian. He had known strangers — a few, and mostly men — who spoke his own language agreeably; but he had known neither man nor woman who showed for it Charlotte's almost mystifying instinct. He remembered how, from the first of their acquaintance, she had made no display of it, quite as if English, between them, his English so matching with hers, were their inevitable medium. He had perceived all by accident — by hearing her talk before him to somebody else that they had an alternative as good; an alternative in fact as much better as the amusement for him was greater in watching her for the slips that never came. Her account of the mystery didn't suffice: her recall of her birth in Florence and Florentine childhood; her parents, from the great country, but themselves already of a corrupt generation, demoralised, falsified, polyglot well before her, with the Tuscan balia who was her first remembrance; the servants of the villa, the dear contadini of the poder, the little girls and the other peasants of the next podere, all the rather shabby but still ever so pretty human furniture of her early time, including the good sisters of the poor convent of the Tuscan hills, the convent shabbier than almost anything else, but prettier too, in which she had been kept at school till the subsequent phase, the phase of the much grander institution in Paris at which Maggie was to arrive, terribly frightened, and as a smaller girl, three years before her own ending of her period of five. Such reminiscences, naturally, gave a ground, but they had not prevented him from insisting that some strictly civil ancestor — generations back, and from the Tuscan hills if she would-made himself felt, ineffaceably, in her blood and in her tone. She knew nothing of the ancestor, but she had taken his theory from him, gracefully enough, as one of the little presents that make friendship flourish. These matters, however, all melted together now, though a sense of them was doubtless concerned, not unnaturally, in the next thing, of the nature of a surmise, that his discretion let him articulate. "You haven't, I rather gather, particularly liked your country?" They would stick, for the time, to their English.

"It doesn't, I fear, seem particularly mine. And it doesn't in the least matter, over there, whether one likes it or not — that is to anyone but one's self. But I didn't like it," said Charlotte Stant.

"That's not encouraging then to me, is it?" the Prince went on.

"Do you mean because you're going?"

"Oh yes, of course we're going. I've wanted immensely to go." She hesitated. "But now? — immediately?"

"In a month or two — it seems to be the new idea." On which there was something in her face — as he imagined — that made him say: "Didn't Maggie write to you?"

"Not of your going at once. But of course you must go. And of course you must stay" — Charlotte was easily clear— "as long as possible."

"Is that what you did?" he laughed. "You stayed as long as possible?"

"Well, it seemed to me so — but I hadn't 'interests.' You'll have them — on a great scale. It's the country for interests," said Charlotte. "If I had only had a few I doubtless wouldn't have left it."

He waited an instant; they were still on their feet. "Yours then are rather here?"

"Oh, mine!" — the girl smiled. "They take up little room, wherever they are."

It determined in him, the way this came from her and what it somehow did for her-it determined in him a speech that would have seemed a few minutes before precarious and in questionable taste. The lead she had given him made the difference, and he felt it as really a lift on finding an honest and natural word rise, by its

license, to his lips. Nothing surely could be, for both of them, more in the note of a high bravery. “I’ve been thinking it all the while so probable, you know, that you would have seen your way to marrying.”

She looked at him an instant, and, just for these seconds, he feared for what he might have spoiled. “To marrying whom?”

“Why, some good, kind, clever, rich American.”

Again his security hung in the balance — then she was, as he felt, admirable.

“I tried everyone I came across. I did my best. I showed I had come, quite publicly, FOR that. Perhaps I showed it too much. At any rate it was no use. I had to recognise it. No one would have me.” Then she seemed to show as sorry for his having to hear of her anything so disconcerting. She pitied his feeling about it; if he was disappointed she would cheer him up. “Existence, you know, all the same, doesn’t depend on that. I mean,” she smiled, “on having caught a husband.”

“Oh — existence!” the Prince vaguely commented. “You think I ought to argue for more than mere existence?” she asked. “I don’t see why MY existence — even reduced as much as you like to being merely mine — should be so impossible. There are things, of sorts, I should be able to have — things I should be able to be. The position of a single woman to-day is very favourable, you know.”

“Favourable to what?”

“Why, just TO existence — which may contain, after all, in one way and another, so much. It may contain, at the worst, even affections; affections in fact quite particularly; fixed, that is, on one’s friends. I’m extremely fond of Maggie, for instance — I quite adore her. How could I adore her more if I were married to one of the people you speak of?”

The Prince gave a laugh. “You might adore HIM more — !”

“Ah, but it isn’t, is it?” she asked, “a question of that.”

“My dear friend,” he returned, “it’s always a question of doing the best for one’s self one can — without injury to others.” He felt by this time that they were indeed on an excellent basis; so he went on again, as if to show frankly his sense of its firmness. “I venture therefore to repeat my hope that you’ll marry some capital fellow; and also to repeat my belief that such a marriage will be more favourable to you, as you call it, than even the spirit of the age.”

She looked at him at first only for answer, and would have appeared to take it with meekness had she not perhaps appeared a little more to take it with gaiety. “Thank you very much,” she simply said; but at that moment their friend was with them again. It was undeniable that, as she came in, Mrs. Assingham looked, with a certain smiling sharpness, from one of them to the other; the perception of which was perhaps what led Charlotte, for reassurance, to pass the question on. “The Prince hopes so much I shall still marry some good person.”

Whether it worked for Mrs. Assingham or not, the Prince was himself, at this, more than ever reassured. He was SAFE, in a word — that was what it all meant; and he had required to be safe. He was really safe enough for almost any joke. “It’s only,” he explained to their hostess, “because of what Miss Stant has been telling me. Don’t we want to keep up her courage?” If the joke was broad he had at least not begun it — not, that is, AS a joke; which was what his companion’s address to their friend made of it. “She has been trying in America, she says, but hasn’t brought it off.”

The tone was somehow not what Mrs. Assingham had expected, but she made the best of it. “Well then,” she replied to the young man, “if you take such an interest you must bring it off.”

“And you must help, dear,” Charlotte said unperturbed— “as you’ve helped, so beautifully, in such things before.” With which, before Mrs. Assingham could meet the appeal, she had addressed herself to the Prince on a matter much nearer to him. “YOUR marriage is on Friday? — on Saturday?”

“Oh, on Friday, no! For what do you take us? There’s not a vulgar omen we’re neglecting. On Saturday, please, at the Oratory, at three o’clock — before twelve assistants exactly.”

“Twelve including ME?”

It struck him — he laughed. “You’ll make the thirteenth. It won’t do!”

“Not,” said Charlotte, “if you’re going in for ‘omens.’ Should you like me to stay away?”

“Dear no — we’ll manage. We’ll make the round number — we’ll have in some old woman. They must keep them there for that, don’t they?”

Mrs. Assingham’s return had at last indicated for him his departure; he had possessed himself again of his hat and approached her to take leave. But he had another word for Charlotte. “I dine to-night with Mr. Verver.

Have you any message?"

The girl seemed to wonder a little. "For Mr. Verver?"

"For Maggie — about her seeing you early. That, I know, is what she'll like."

"Then I'll come early — thanks."

"I daresay," he went on, "she'll send for you. I mean send a carriage."

"Oh, I don't require that, thanks. I can go, for a penny, can't I?" she asked of Mrs. Assingham, "in an omnibus."

"Oh, I say!" said the Prince while Mrs. Assingham looked at her blandly.

"Yes, love — and I'll give you the penny. She shall get there," the good lady added to their friend.

But Charlotte, as the latter took leave of her, thought of something else. "There's a great favour, Prince, that I want to ask of you. I want, between this and Saturday, to make Maggie a marriage-present."

"Oh, I say!" the young man again soothingly exclaimed.

"Ah, but I MUST," she went on. "It's really almost for that I came back. It was impossible to get in America what I wanted."

Mrs. Assingham showed anxiety. "What is it then, dear, you want?"

But the girl looked only at their companion. "That's what the Prince, if he'll be so good, must help me to decide."

"Can't *I*," Mrs. Assingham asked, "help you to decide?"

"Certainly, darling, we must talk it well over." And she kept her eyes on the Prince. "But I want him, if he kindly will, to go with me to look. I want him to judge with me and choose. That, if you can spare the hour," she said, "is the great favour I mean."

He raised his eyebrows at her — he wonderfully smiled. "What you came back from America to ask? Ah, certainly then, I must find the hour!" He wonderfully smiled, but it was rather more, after all, than he had been reckoning with. It went somehow so little with the rest that, directly, for him, it wasn't the note of safety; it preserved this character, at the best, but by being the note of publicity. Quickly, quickly, however, the note of publicity struck him as better than any other. In another moment even it seemed positively what he wanted; for what so much as publicity put their relation on the right footing? By this appeal to Mrs. Assingham it was established as right, and she immediately showed that such was her own understanding.

"Certainly, Prince," she laughed, "you must find the hour!" And it was really so express a license from her, as representing friendly judgment, public opinion, the moral law, the margin allowed a husband about to be, or whatever, that, after observing to Charlotte that, should she come to Portland Place in the morning, he would make a point of being there to see her and so, easily, arrange with her about a time, he took his departure with the absolutely confirmed impression of knowing, as he put it to himself, where he was. Which was what he had prolonged his visit for. He was where he could stay.

IV

"I don't quite see, my dear," Colonel Assingham said to his wife the night of Charlotte's arrival, "I don't quite see, I'm bound to say, why you take it, even at the worst, so ferociously hard. It isn't your fault, after all, is it? I'll be hanged, at any rate, if it's mine."

The hour was late, and the young lady who had disembarked at Southampton that morning to come up by the "steamer special," and who had then settled herself at an hotel only to re-settle herself a couple of hours later at a private house, was by this time, they might hope, peacefully resting from her exploits. There had been two men at dinner, rather battered brothers-in-arms, of his own period, casually picked up by her host the day before, and when the gentlemen, after the meal, rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room, Charlotte, pleading fatigue, had already excused herself. The beguiled warriors, however, had stayed till after eleven — Mrs. Assingham, though finally quite without illusions, as she said, about the military character, was always beguiling to old soldiers; and as the Colonel had come in, before dinner, only in time to dress, he had not till this moment really been summoned to meet his companion over the situation that, as he was now to learn, their visitor's advent had created for them. It was actually more than midnight, the servants had been sent to bed, the rattle of the wheels had ceased to come in through a window still open to the August air, and Robert Assingham had been steadily learning, all the while, what it thus behoved him to know. But the words just quoted from him presented themselves, for the moment, as the essence of his spirit and his attitude. He disengaged, he would be damned if he didn't — they were both phrases he repeatedly used — his responsibility. The simplest, the sanest, the most obliging of men, he habitually indulged in extravagant language. His wife had once told him, in relation to his violence of speech; that such excesses, on his part, made her think of a retired General whom she had once seen playing with toy soldiers, fighting and winning battles, carrying on sieges and annihilating enemies with little fortresses of wood and little armies of tin. Her husband's exaggerated emphasis was his box of toy soldiers, his military game. It harmlessly gratified in him, for his declining years, the military instinct; bad words, when sufficiently numerous and arrayed in their might, could represent battalions, squadrons, tremendous cannonades and glorious charges of cavalry. It was natural, it was delightful — the romance, and for her as well, of camp life and of the perpetual booming of guns. It was fighting to the end, to the death, but no one was ever killed.

Less fortunate than she, nevertheless, in spite of his wealth of expression, he had not yet found the image that described her favourite game; all he could do was practically to leave it to her, emulating her own philosophy. He had again and again sat up late to discuss those situations in which her finer consciousness abounded, but he had never failed to deny that anything in life, anything of hers, could be a situation for himself. She might be in fifty at once if she liked — and it was what women did like, at their ease, after all; there always being, when they had too much of any, some man, as they were well aware, to get them out. He wouldn't at any price, have one, of any sort whatever, of his own, or even be in one along with her. He watched her, accordingly, in her favourite element, very much as he had sometimes watched, at the Aquarium, the celebrated lady who, in a slight, though tight, bathing-suit, turned somersaults and did tricks in the tank of water which looked so cold and uncomfortable to the non-amphibious. He listened to his companion to-night, while he smoked his last pipe, he watched her through her demonstration, quite as if he had paid a shilling. But it was true that, this being the case, he desired the value of his money. What was it, in the name of wonder, that she was so bent on being responsible FOR? What did she pretend was going to happen, and what, at the worst, could the poor girl do, even granting she wanted to do anything? What, at the worst, for that matter, could she be conceived to have in her head?

"If she had told me the moment she got here," Mrs. Assingham replied, "I shouldn't have my difficulty in finding out. But she wasn't so obliging, and I see no sign at all of her becoming so. What's certain is that she didn't come for nothing. She wants" — she worked it out at her leisure— "to see the Prince again. THAT isn't what troubles me. I mean that such a fact, as a fact, isn't. But what I ask myself is, What does she want it FOR?"

"What's the good of asking yourself if you know you don't know?" The Colonel sat back at his own ease, with an ankle resting on the other knee and his eyes attentive to the good appearance of an extremely slender foot which he kept jerking in its neat integument of fine-spun black silk and patent leather. It seemed to confess, this member, to consciousness of military discipline, everything about it being as polished and

perfect, as straight and tight and trim, as a soldier on parade. It went so far as to imply that someone or other would have "got" something or other, confinement to barracks or suppression of pay, if it hadn't been just as it was. Bob Assingham was distinguished altogether by a leanness of person, a leanness quite distinct from physical laxity, which might have been determined, on the part of superior powers, by views of transport and accommodation, and which in fact verged on the abnormal. He "did" himself as well as his friends mostly knew, yet remained hungrily thin, with facial, with abdominal cavities quite grim in their effect, and with a consequent looseness of apparel that, combined with a choice of queer light shades and of strange straw-like textures, of the aspect of Chinese mats, provocative of wonder at his sources of supply, suggested the habit of tropic islands, a continual cane-bottomed chair, a governorship exercised on wide verandahs. His smooth round head, with the particular shade of its white hair, was like a silver pot reversed; his cheekbones and the bristle of his moustache were worthy of Attila the Hun. The hollows of his eyes were deep and darksome, but the eyes within them, were like little blue flowers plucked that morning. He knew everything that could be known about life, which he regarded as, for far the greater part, a matter of pecuniary arrangement. His wife accused him of a want, alike, of moral and of intellectual reaction, or rather indeed of a complete incapacity for either. He never went even so far as to understand what she meant, and it didn't at all matter, since he could be in spite of the limitation a perfectly social creature. The infirmities, the predicaments of men neither surprised nor shocked him, and indeed — which was perhaps his only real loss in a thrifty career — scarce even amused; he took them for granted without horror, classifying them after their kind and calculating results and chances. He might, in old bewildering climates, in old campaigns of cruelty and license, have had such revelations and known such amazements that he had nothing more to learn. But he was wholly content, in spite of his fondness, in domestic discussion, for the superlative degree; and his kindness, in the oddest way, seemed to have nothing to do with his experience. He could deal with things perfectly, for all his needs, without getting near them.

This was the way he dealt with his wife, a large proportion of whose meanings he knew he could neglect. He edited, for their general economy, the play of her mind, just as he edited, savingly, with the stump of a pencil, her redundant telegrams. The thing in the world that was least of a mystery to him was his Club, which he was accepted as perhaps too completely managing, and which he managed on lines of perfect penetration. His connection with it was really a master-piece of editing. This was in fact, to come back, very much the process he might have been proposing to apply to Mrs. Assingham's view of what was now before them; that is to their connection with Charlotte Stant's possibilities. They wouldn't lavish on them all their little fortune of curiosity and alarm; certainly they wouldn't spend their cherished savings so early in the day. He liked Charlotte, moreover, who was a smooth and compact inmate, and whom he felt as, with her instincts that made against waste, much more of his own sort than his wife. He could talk with her about Fanny almost better than he could talk with Fanny about Charlotte. However, he made at present the best of the latter necessity, even to the pressing of the question he has been noted as having last uttered. "If you can't think what to be afraid of, wait till you can think. Then you'll do it much better. Or otherwise, if that's waiting too long, find out from HER. Don't try to find out from ME. Ask her herself."

Mrs. Assingham denied, as we know, that her husband had a play of mind; so that she could, on her side, treat these remarks only as if they had been senseless physical gestures or nervous facial movements. She overlooked them as from habit and kindness; yet there was no one to whom she talked so persistently of such intimate things. "It's her friendship with Maggie that's the immense complication. Because THAT," she audibly mused, "is so natural."

"Then why can't she have come out for it?"

"She came out," Mrs. Assingham continued to meditate, "because she hates America. There was no place for her there — she didn't fit in. She wasn't in sympathy — no more were the people she saw. Then it's hideously dear; she can't, on her means, begin to live there. Not at all as she can, in a way, here."

"In the way, you mean, of living with US?"

"Of living with anyone. She can't live by visits alone — and she doesn't want to. She's too good for it even if she could. But she will — she MUST, sooner or later — stay with THEM. Maggie will want her — Maggie will make her. Besides, she'll want to herself."

"Then why won't that do," the Colonel asked, "for you to think it's what she has come for?"

"How will it do, HOW?" — she went on as without hearing him.

"That's what one keeps feeling."

"Why shouldn't it do beautifully?"

"That anything of the past," she brooded, "should come back NOW? How will it do, how will it do?"

"It will do, I daresay, without your wringing your hands over it. When, my dear," the Colonel pursued as he smoked, "have you ever seen anything of yours — anything that you've done — NOT do?"

"Ah, I didn't do this!" It brought her answer straight. "I didn't bring her back."

"Did you expect her to stay over there all her days to oblige you?"

"Not a bit — for I shouldn't have minded her coming after their marriage. It's her coming, this way, before." To which she added with inconsequence: "I'm too sorry for her — of course she can't enjoy it. But I don't see what perversity rides her. She needn't have looked it all so in the face — as she doesn't do it, I suppose, simply for discipline. It's almost — that's the bore of it — discipline to ME."

"Perhaps then," said Bob Assingham, "that's what has been her idea. Take it, for God's sake, as discipline to you and have done with it. It will do," he added, "for discipline to me as well."

She was far, however, from having done with it; it was a situation with such different sides, as she said, and to none of which one could, in justice, be blind. "It isn't in the least, you know, for instance, that I believe she's bad. Never, never," Mrs. Assingham declared. "I don't think that of her."

"Then why isn't that enough?"

Nothing was enough, Mrs. Assingham signified, but that she should develop her thought. "She doesn't deliberately intend, she doesn't consciously wish, the least complication. It's perfectly true that she thinks Maggie a dear — as who doesn't? She's incapable of any PLAN to hurt a hair of her head. Yet here she is — and there THEY are," she wound up.

Her husband again, for a little, smoked in silence. "What in the world, between them, ever took place?"

"Between Charlotte and the Prince? Why, nothing — except their having to recognise that nothing COULD. That was their little romance — it was even their little tragedy."

"But what the deuce did they DO?"

"Do? They fell in love with each other — but, seeing it wasn't possible, gave each other up."

"Then where was the romance?"

"Why, in their frustration, in their having the courage to look the facts in the face."

"What facts?" the Colonel went on.

"Well, to begin with, that of their neither of them having the means to marry. If she had had even a little — a little, I mean, for two — I believe he would bravely have done it." After which, as her husband but emitted an odd vague sound, she corrected herself. "I mean if he himself had had only a little — or a little more than a little, a little for a prince. They would have done what they could" — she did them justice" — if there had been a way. But there wasn't a way, and Charlotte, quite to her honour, I consider, understood it. He HAD to have money — it was a question of life and death. It wouldn't have been a bit amusing, either, to marry him as a pauper — I mean leaving him one. That was what she had — as HE had — the reason to see."

"And their reason is what you call their romance?"

She looked at him a moment. "What do you want more?"

"Didn't HE," the Colonel inquired, "want anything more? Or didn't, for that matter, poor Charlotte herself?"

She kept her eyes on him; there was a manner in it that half answered. "They were thoroughly in love. She might have been his—" She checked herself; she even for a minute lost herself. "She might have been anything she liked — except his wife."

"But she wasn't," said the Colonel very smokingly.

"She wasn't," Mrs. Assingham echoed.

The echo, not loud but deep, filled for a little the room. He seemed to listen to it die away; then he began again. "How are you sure?"

She waited before saying, but when she spoke it was definite. "There wasn't time."

He had a small laugh for her reason; he might have expected some other. "Does it take so much time?"

She herself, however, remained serious. "It takes more than they had."

He was detached, but he wondered. "What was the matter with their time?" After which, as, remembering it all, living it over and piecing it together, she only considered, "You mean that you came in with your idea?" he demanded.

It brought her quickly to the point, and as if also in a measure to answer herself. "Not a bit of it — THEN.

But you surely recall," she went on, "the way, a year ago, everything took place. They had parted before he had ever heard of Maggie."

"Why hadn't he heard of her from Charlotte herself?"

"Because she had never spoken of her."

"Is that also," the Colonel inquired, "what she has told you?"

"I'm not speaking," his wife returned, "of what she has told me. That's one thing. I'm speaking of what I know by myself. That's another."

"You feel, in other words, that she lies to you?" Bob Assingham more sociably asked.

She neglected the question, treating it as gross. "She never so much, at the time, as named Maggie."

It was so positive that it appeared to strike him. "It's he then who has told you?"

She after a moment admitted it. "It's he."

"And he doesn't lie?"

"No — to do him justice. I believe he absolutely doesn't. If I hadn't believed it," Mrs. Assingham declared, for her general justification, "I would have had nothing to do with him — that is in this connection. He's a gentleman — I mean ALL as much of one as he ought to be. And he had nothing to gain. That helps," she added, "even a gentleman. It was I who named Maggie to him — a year from last May. He had never heard of her before."

"Then it's grave," said the Colonel.

She hesitated. "Do you mean grave for me?"

"Oh, that everything's grave for 'you' is what we take for granted and are fundamentally talking about. It's grave — it WAS — for Charlotte. And it's grave for Maggie. That is it WAS — when he did see her. Or when she did see HIM."

"You don't torment me as much as you would like," she presently went on, "because you think of nothing that I haven't a thousand times thought of, and because I think of everything that you never will. It would all," she recognised, "have been grave if it hadn't all been right. You can't make out," she contended, "that we got to Rome before the end of February."

He more than agreed. "There's nothing in life, my dear, that I CAN make out."

Well, there was nothing in life, apparently, that she, at real need, couldn't. "Charlotte, who had been there, that year, from early, quite from November, left suddenly, you'll quite remember, about the 10th of April. She was to have stayed on — she was to have stayed, naturally, more or less, for us; and she was to have stayed all the more that the Ververs, due all winter, but delayed, week after week, in Paris, were at last really coming. They were coming — that is Maggie was — largely to see her, and above all to be with her THERE. It was all altered — by Charlotte's going to Florence. She went from one day to the other — you forget everything. She gave her reasons, but I thought it odd, at the time; I had a sense that something must have happened. The difficulty was that, though I knew a little, I didn't know enough. I didn't know her relation with him had been, as you say, a 'near' thing — that is I didn't know HOW near. The poor girl's departure was a flight — she went to save herself."

He had listened more than he showed — as came out in his tone. "To save herself?"

"Well, also, really, I think, to save HIM too. I saw it afterwards — I see it all now. He would have been sorry — he didn't want to hurt her."

"Oh, I daresay," the Colonel laughed. "They generally don't!"

"At all events," his wife pursued, "she escaped — they both did; for they had had simply to face it. Their marriage couldn't be, and, if that was so, the sooner they put the Apennines between them the better. It had taken them, it is true, some time to feel this and to find it out. They had met constantly, and not always publicly, all that winter; they had met more than was known — though it was a good deal known. More, certainly," she said, "than I then imagined — though I don't know what difference it would after all have made with me. I liked him, I thought him charming, from the first of our knowing him; and now, after more than a year, he has done nothing to spoil it. And there are things he might have done — things that many men easily would. Therefore I believe in him, and I was right, at first, in knowing I was going to. So I haven't" — and she stated it as she might have quoted from a slate, after adding up the items, the sum of a column of figures— "so I haven't, I say to myself, been a fool."

"Well, are you trying to make out that I've said you have? All their case wants, at any rate," Bob Assingham declared, "is that you should leave it well alone. It's theirs now; they've bought it, over the

counter, and paid for it. It has ceased to be yours."

"Of which case," she asked, "are you speaking?"

He smoked a minute: then with a groan: "Lord, are there so many?"

"There's Maggie's and the Prince's, and there's the Prince's and Charlotte's."

"Oh yes; and then," the Colonel scoffed, "there's Charlotte's and the Prince's."

"There's Maggie's and Charlotte's," she went on— "and there's also Maggie's and mine. I think too that there's Charlotte's and mine. Yes," she mused, "Charlotte's and mine is certainly a case. In short, you see, there are plenty. But I mean," she said, "to keep my head."

"Are we to settle them all," he inquired, "to-night?"

"I should lose it if things had happened otherwise — if I had acted with any folly." She had gone on in her earnestness, unheeding of his question. "I shouldn't be able to bear that now. But my good conscience is my strength; no one can accuse me. The Ververs came on to Rome alone — Charlotte, after their days with her in Florence, had decided about America. Maggie, I daresay, had helped her; she must have made her a present, and a handsome one, so that many things were easy. Charlotte left them, came to England, 'joined' somebody or other, sailed for New York. I have still her letter from Milan, telling me; I didn't know at the moment all that was behind it, but I felt in it nevertheless the undertaking of a new life. Certainly, in any case, it cleared THAT air — I mean the dear old Roman, in which we were steeped. It left the field free — it gave me a free hand. There was no question for me of anybody else when I brought the two others together. More than that, there was no question for them. So you see," she concluded, "where that puts me." She got up, on the words, very much as if they were the blue daylight towards which, through a darksome tunnel, she had been pushing her way, and the elation in her voice, combined with her recovered alertness, might have signified the sharp whistle of the train that shoots at last into the open. She turned about the room; she looked out a moment into the August night; she stopped, here and there, before the flowers in bowls and vases. Yes, it was distinctly as if she had proved what was needing proof, as if the issue of her operation had been, almost unexpectedly, a success. Old arithmetic had perhaps been fallacious, but the new settled the question. Her husband, oddly, however, kept his place without apparently measuring these results. As he had been amused at her intensity, so he was not uplifted by her relief; his interest might in fact have been more enlisted than he allowed. "Do you mean," he presently asked, "that he had already forgot about Charlotte?"

She faced round as if he had touched a spring. "He WANTED to, naturally — and it was much the best thing he could do." She was in possession of the main case, as it truly seemed; she had it all now. "He was capable of the effort, and he took the best way. Remember too what Maggie then seemed to us."

"She's very nice; but she always seems to me, more than anything else, the young woman who has a million a year. If you mean that that's what she especially seemed to him, you of course place the thing in your light. The effort to forget Charlotte couldn't, I grant you, have been so difficult."

This pulled her up but for an instant. "I never said he didn't from the first — I never said that he doesn't more and more — like Maggie's money."

"I never said I shouldn't have liked it myself," Bob Assingham returned. He made no movement; he smoked another minute. "How much did Maggie know?"

"How much?" She seemed to consider — as if it were between quarts and gallons — how best to express the quantity. "She knew what Charlotte, in Florence, had told her."

"And what had Charlotte told her?"

"Very little."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Why, this — that she couldn't tell her." And she explained a little what she meant. "There are things, my dear — haven't you felt it yourself, coarse as you are? — that no one could tell Maggie. There are things that, upon my word, I shouldn't care to attempt to tell her now."

The Colonel smoked on it. "She'd be so scandalised?"

"She'd be so frightened. She'd be, in her strange little way, so hurt. She wasn't born to know evil. She must never know it." Bob Assingham had a queer grim laugh; the sound of which, in fact, fixed his wife before him. "We're taking grand ways to prevent it."

But she stood there to protest. "We're not taking any ways. The ways are all taken; they were taken from the moment he came up to our carriage that day in Villa Borghese — the second or third of her days in Rome, when, as you remember, you went off somewhere with Mr. Verver, and the Prince, who had got into the

carriage with us, came home with us to tea. They had met; they had seen each other well; they were in relation: the rest was to come of itself and as it could. It began, practically, I recollect, in our drive. Maggie happened to learn, by some other man's greeting of him, in the bright Roman way, from a streetcorner as we passed, that one of the Prince's baptismal names, the one always used for him among his relations, was Amerigo: which (as you probably don't know, however, even after a lifetime of ME), was the name, four hundred years ago, or whenever, of the pushing man who followed, across the sea, in the wake of Columbus and succeeded, where Columbus had failed, in becoming godfather, or name-father, to the new Continent; so that the thought of any connection with him can even now thrill our artless breasts."

The Colonel's grim placidity could always quite adequately meet his wife's not infrequent imputation of ignorances, on the score of the land of her birth, unperturbed and unashamed; and these dark depths were even at the present moment not directly lighted by an inquiry that managed to be curious without being apologetic. "But where does the connection come in?"

His wife was prompt. "By the women — that is by some obliging woman, of old, who was a descendant of the pushing man, the make-believe discoverer, and whom the Prince is therefore luckily able to refer to as an ancestress. A branch of the other family had become great — great enough, at least, to marry into his; and the name of the navigator, crowned with glory, was, very naturally, to become so the fashion among them that some son, of every generation, was appointed to wear it. My point is, at any rate, that I recall noticing at the time how the Prince was, from the start, helped with the dear Ververs by his wearing it. The connection became romantic for Maggie the moment she took it in; she filled out, in a flash, every link that might be vague. 'By that sign,' I quite said to myself, 'he'll conquer' — with his good fortune, of course, of having the other necessary signs too. It really," said Mrs. Assingham, "was, practically, the fine side of the wedge. Which struck me as also," she wound up, "a lovely note for the candour of the Ververs."

The Colonel took in the tale, but his comment was prosaic. "He knew, Amerigo, what he was about. And I don't mean the OLD one."

"I know what you mean!" his wife bravely threw off.

"The old one" — he pointed his effect "isn't the only discoverer in the family."

"Oh, as much as you like! If he discovered America — or got himself honoured as if he had — his successors were, in due time, to discover the Americans. And it was one of them in particular, doubtless, who was to discover how patriotic we are."

"Wouldn't this be the same one," the Colonel asked, "who really discovered what you call the connection?"

She gave him a look. "The connection's a true thing — the connection's perfectly historic, Your insinuations recoil upon your cynical mind. Don't you understand," she asked, "that the history of such people is known, root and branch, at every moment of its course?"

"Oh, it's all right," said Bob Assingham.

"Go to the British Museum," his companion continued with spirit.

"And what am I to do there?"

"There's a whole immense room, or recess, or department, or whatever, filled with books written about his family alone. You can see for yourself."

"Have you seen for YOUR self?"

She faltered but an instant. "Certainly — I went one day with Maggie. We looked him up, so to say. They were most civil." And she fell again into the current her husband had slightly ruffled. "The effect was produced, the charm began to work, at all events, in Rome, from that hour of the Prince's drive with us. My only course, afterwards, had to be to make the best of it. It was certainly good enough for that," Mrs. Assingham hastened to add, "and I didn't in the least see my duty in making the worst. In the same situation, to-day; I wouldn't act differently. I entered into the case as it then appeared to me — and as, for the matter of that, it still does. I LIKED it, I thought all sorts of good of it, and nothing can even now," she said with some intensity, "make me think anything else."

"Nothing can ever make you think anything you don't want to," the Colonel, still in his chair, remarked over his pipe. "You've got a precious power of thinking whatever you do want. You want also, from moment to moment, to think such desperately different things. What happened," he went on, "was that you fell violently in love with the Prince yourself, and that as you couldn't get me out of the way you had to take some roundabout course. You couldn't marry him, any more than Charlotte could — that is not to yourself.

But you could to somebody else — it was always the Prince, it was always marriage. You could to your little friend, to whom there were no objections."

"Not only there were no objections, but there were reasons, positive ones — and all excellent, all charming." She spoke with an absence of all repudiation of his exposure of the spring of her conduct; and this abstention, clearly and effectively conscious, evidently cost her nothing. "It IS always the Prince; and it IS always, thank heaven, marriage. And these are the things, God grant, that it will always be. That I could help, a year ago, most assuredly made me happy, and it continues to make me happy."

"Then why aren't you quiet?"

"I AM quiet," said Fanny Assingham.

He looked at her, with his colourless candour, still in his place; she moved about again, a little, emphasising by her unrest her declaration of her tranquillity. He was as silent, at first, as if he had taken her answer, but he was not to keep it long. "What do you make of it that, by your own show, Charlotte couldn't tell her all? What do you make of it that the Prince didn't tell her anything? Say one understands that there are things she can't be told — since, as you put it, she is so easily scared and shocked." He produced these objections slowly, giving her time, by his pauses, to stop roaming and come back to him. But she was roaming still when he concluded his inquiry. "If there hadn't been anything there shouldn't have been between the pair before Charlotte bolted — in order, precisely, as you say, that there SHOULDN'T be: why in the world was what there HAD been too bad to be spoken of?"

Mrs. Assingham, after this question, continued still to circulate — not directly meeting it even when at last she stopped.

"I thought you wanted me to be quiet."

"So I do — and I'm trying to make you so much so that you won't worry more. Can't you be quiet on THAT?"

She thought a moment — then seemed to try. "To relate that she had to 'bolt' for the reasons we speak of, even though the bolting had done for her what she wished — THAT I can perfectly feel Charlotte's not wanting to do."

"Ah then, if it HAS done for her what she wished-!" But the Colonel's conclusion hung by the "if" which his wife didn't take up. So it hung but the longer when he presently spoke again. "All one wonders, in that case, is why then she has come back to him."

"Say she hasn't come back to him. Not really to HIM."

"I'll say anything you like. But that won't do me the same good as your saying it."

"Nothing, my dear, will do you good," Mrs. Assingham returned. "You don't care for anything in itself; you care for nothing but to be grossly amused because I don't keep washing my hands — !"

"I thought your whole argument was that everything is so right that this is precisely what you do."

But his wife, as it was a point she had often made, could go on as she had gone on before. "You're perfectly indifferent, really; you're perfectly immoral. You've taken part in the sack of cities, and I'm sure you've done dreadful things yourself. But I DON'T trouble my head, if you like. 'So now there!'" she laughed.

He accepted her laugh, but he kept his way. "Well, I back poor Charlotte."

"'Back' her?"

"To know what she wants."

"Ah then, so do I. She does know what she wants." And Mrs. Assingham produced this quantity, at last, on the girl's behalf, as the ripe result of her late wanderings and musings. She had groped through their talk, for the thread, and now she had got it. "She wants to be magnificent."

"She is," said the Colonel almost cynically.

"She wants" — his wife now had it fast "to be thoroughly superior, and she's capable of that."

"Of wanting to?"

"Of carrying out her idea."

"And what IS her idea?"

"To see Maggie through."

Bob Assingham wondered. "Through what?"

"Through everything. She KNOWS the Prince."

"And Maggie doesn't. No, dear thing" — Mrs. Assingham had to recognise it— "she doesn't."

"So that Charlotte has come out to give her lessons?"

She continued, Fanny Assingham, to work out her thought. "She has done this great thing for him. That is, a year ago, she practically did it. She practically, at any rate, helped him to do it himself — and helped me to help him. She kept off, she stayed away, she left him free; and what, moreover, were her silences to Maggie but a direct aid to him? If she had spoken in Florence; if she had told her own poor story; if she had, come back at any time — till within a few weeks ago; if she hadn't gone to New York and hadn't held out there: if she hadn't done these things all that has happened since would certainly have been different. Therefore she's in a position to be consistent now. She knows the Prince," Mrs. Assingham repeated. It involved even again her former recognition. "And Maggie, dear thing, doesn't."

She was high, she was lucid, she was almost inspired; and it was but the deeper drop therefore to her husband's flat common sense. "In other words Maggie is, by her ignorance, in danger? Then if she's in danger, there IS danger."

"There WON'T be — with Charlotte's understanding of it. That's where she has had her conception of being able to be heroic, of being able in fact to be sublime. She is, she will be" — the good lady by this time glowed. "So she sees it — to become, for her best friend, an element of POSITIVE safety."

Bob Assingham looked at it hard. "Which of them do you call her best friend?"

She gave a toss of impatience. "I'll leave you to discover!" But the grand truth thus made out she had now completely adopted. "It's for US, therefore, to be hers."

"'Hers'?"

"You and I. It's for us to be Charlotte's. It's for us, on our side, to see HER through."

"Through her sublimity?"

"Through her noble, lonely life. Only — that's essential — it mustn't be lonely. It will be all right if she marries."

"So we're to marry her?"

"We're to marry her. It will be," Mrs. Assingham continued, "the great thing I can do." She made it out more and more. "It will make up."

"Make up for what?" As she said nothing, however, his desire for lucidity renewed itself. "If everything's so all right what is there to make up for?"

"Why, if I did do either of them, by any chance, a wrong. If I made a mistake."

"You'll make up for it by making another?" And then as she again took her time: "I thought your whole point is just that you're sure."

"One can never be ideally sure of anything. There are always possibilities."

"Then, if we can but strike so wild, why keep meddling?"

It made her again look at him. "Where would you have been, my dear, if I hadn't meddled with YOU?"

"Ah, that wasn't meddling — I was your own. I was your own," said the Colonel, "from the moment I didn't object."

"Well, these people won't object. They are my own too — in the sense that I'm awfully fond of them. Also in the sense," she continued, "that I think they're not so very much less fond of me. Our relation, all round, exists — it's a reality, and a very good one; we're mixed up, so to speak, and it's too late to change it. We must live IN it and with it. Therefore to see that Charlotte gets a good husband as soon as possible — that, as I say, will be one of my ways of living. It will cover," she said with conviction, "all the ground." And then as his own conviction appeared to continue as little to match: "The ground, I mean, of any nervousness I may ever feel. It will be in fact my duty and I shan't rest till my duty's performed." She had arrived by this time at something like exaltation. "I shall give, for the next year or two if necessary, my life to it. I shall have done in that case what I can."

He took it at last as it came. "You hold there's no limit to what you 'can'?"

"I don't say there's no limit, or anything of the sort. I say there are good chances — enough of them for hope. Why shouldn't there be when a girl is, after all, all that she is?"

"By after 'all' you mean after she's in love with somebody else?"

The Colonel put his question with a quietude doubtless designed to be fatal; but it scarcely pulled her up. "She's not too much in love not herself to want to marry. She would now particularly like to."

"Has she told you so?"

"Not yet. It's too soon. But she will. Meanwhile, however, I don't require the information. Her marrying

will prove the truth."

"And what truth?"

"The truth of everything I say."

"Prove it to whom?"

"Well, to myself, to begin with. That will be enough for me — to work for her. What it will prove," Mrs. Assingham presently went on, "will be that she's cured. That she accepts the situation."

He paid this the tribute of a long pull at his pipe. "The situation of doing the one thing she can that will really seem to cover her tracks?"

His wife looked at him, the good dry man, as if now at last he was merely vulgar. "The one thing she can do that will really make new tracks altogether. The thing that, before any other, will be wise and right. The thing that will best give her her chance to be magnificent."

He slowly emitted his smoke. "And best give you, by the same token, yours to be magnificent with her?"

"I shall be as magnificent, at least, as I can."

Bob Assingham got up. "And you call ME immoral?"

She hesitated. "I'll call you stupid if you prefer. But stupidity pushed to a certain point IS, you know, immorality. Just so what is morality but high intelligence?" This he was unable to tell her; which left her more definitely to conclude. "Besides, it's all, at the worst, great fun."

"Oh, if you simply put it at THAT — !"

His implication was that in this case they had a common ground; yet even thus he couldn't catch her by it. "Oh, I don't mean," she said from the threshold, "the fun that you mean. Good-night." In answer to which, as he turned out the electric light, he gave an odd, short groan, almost a grunt. He HAD apparently meant some particular kind.

V

"Well, now I must tell you, for I want to be absolutely honest." So Charlotte spoke, a little ominously, after they had got into the Park. "I don't want to pretend, and I can't pretend a moment longer. You may think of me what you will, but I don't care. I knew I shouldn't and I find now how little. I came back for this. Not really for anything else. For this," she repeated as, under the influence of her tone, the Prince had already come to a pause.

"For 'this'?" He spoke as if the particular thing she indicated were vague to him — or were, rather, a quantity that couldn't, at the most, be much.

It would be as much, however, as she should be able to make it. "To have one hour alone with you." It had rained heavily in the night, and though the pavements were now dry, thanks to a cleansing breeze, the August morning, with its hovering, thick-drifting clouds and freshened air, was cool and grey. The multitudinous green of the Park had been deepened, and a wholesome smell of irrigation, purging the place of dust and of odours less acceptable, rose from the earth. Charlotte had looked about her, with expression, from the first of their coming in, quite as if for a deep greeting, for general recognition: the day was, even in the heart of London, of a rich, low-browed, weatherwashed English type. It was as if it had been waiting for her, as if she knew it, placed it, loved it, as if it were in fact a part of what she had come back for. So far as this was the case the impression of course could only be lost on a mere vague Italian; it was one of those for which you had to be, blessedly, an American — as indeed you had to be, blessedly, an American for all sorts of things: so long as you hadn't, blessedly or not, to remain in America. The Prince had, by half-past ten — as also by definite appointment — called in Cadogan Place for Mrs. Assingham's visitor, and then, after brief delay, the two had walked together up Sloane Street and got straight into the Park from Knightsbridge. The understanding to this end had taken its place, after a couple of days, as inevitably consequent on the appeal made by the girl during those first moments in Mrs. Assingham's drawing-room. It was an appeal the couple of days had done nothing to invalidate — everything, much rather, to place in a light, and as to which, obviously, it wouldn't have fitted that anyone should raise an objection. Who was there, for that matter, to raise one, from the moment Mrs. Assingham, informed and apparently not disapproving, didn't intervene? This the young man had asked himself — with a very sufficient sense of what would have made him ridiculous. He wasn't going to begin — that at least was certain — by showing a fear. Even had fear at first been sharp in him, moreover, it would already, not a little, have dropped; so happy, all round, so propitious, he quite might have called it, had been the effect of this rapid interval.

The time had been taken up largely by his active reception of his own wedding-guests and by Maggie's scarce less absorbed entertainment of her friend, whom she had kept for hours together in Portland Place; whom she had not, as wouldn't have been convenient, invited altogether as yet to migrate, but who had been present, with other persons, his contingent, at luncheon, at tea, at dinner, at perpetual repasts — he had never in his life, it struck him, had to reckon with so much eating — whenever he had looked in. If he had not again, till this hour, save for a minute, seen Charlotte alone, so, positively, all the while, he had not seen even Maggie; and if, therefore, he had not seen even Maggie, nothing was more natural than that he shouldn't have seen Charlotte. The exceptional minute, a mere snatch, at the tail of the others, on the huge Portland Place staircase had sufficiently enabled the girl to remind him — so ready she assumed him to be — of what they were to do. Time pressed if they were to do it at all. Everyone had brought gifts; his relations had brought wonders — how did they still have, where did they still find, such treasures? She only had brought nothing, and she was ashamed; yet even by the sight of the rest of the tribute she wouldn't be put off. She would do what she could, and he was, unknown to Maggie, he must remember, to give her his aid. He had prolonged the minute so far as to take time to hesitate, for a reason, and then to risk bringing his reason out. The risk was because he might hurt her — hurt her pride, if she had that particular sort. But she might as well be hurt one way as another; and, besides, that particular sort of pride was just what she hadn't. So his slight resistance, while they lingered, had been just easy enough not to be impossible.

"I hate to encourage you — and for such a purpose, after all — to spend your money."

She had stood a stair or two below him; where, while she looked up at him beneath the high, domed light of the hall, she rubbed with her palm the polished mahogany of the balustrade, which was mounted on fine ironwork, eighteenth-century English. "Because you think I must have so little? I've enough, at any rate —

enough for us to take our hour. Enough," she had smiled, "is as good as a feast! And then," she had said, "it isn't of course a question of anything expensive, gorged with treasure as Maggie is; it isn't a question of competing or outshining. What, naturally, in the way of the priceless, hasn't she got? Mine is to be the offering of the poor — something, precisely, that — no rich person COULD ever give her, and that, being herself too rich ever to buy it, she would therefore never have." Charlotte had spoken as if after so much thought. "Only, as it can't be fine, it ought to be funny — and that's the sort of thing to hunt for. Hunting in London, besides, is amusing in itself."

He recalled even how he had been struck with her word. "'Funny'?" "Oh, I don't mean a comic toy — I mean some little thing with a charm. But absolutely RIGHT, in its comparative cheapness. That's what I call funny," she had explained. "You used," she had also added, "to help me to get things cheap in Rome. You were splendid for beating down. I have them all still, I needn't say — the little bargains I there owed you. There are bargains in London in August."

"Ah, but I don't understand your English buying, and I confess I find it dull." So much as that, while they turned to go up together, he had objected. "I understood my poor dear Romans."

"It was they who understood you — that was your pull," she had laughed. "Our amusement here is just that they don't understand us. We can make it amusing. You'll see."

If he had hesitated again it was because the point permitted. "The amusement surely will be to find our present."

"Certainly — as I say."

"Well, if they don't come down — ?"

"Then we'll come up. There's always something to be done. Besides, Prince," she had gone on, "I'm not, if you come to that, absolutely a pauper. I'm too poor for some things," she had said — yet, strange as she was, lightly enough; "but I'm not too poor for others." And she had paused again at the top. "I've been saving up."

He had really challenged it. "In America?"

"Yes, even there — with my motive. And we oughtn't, you know," she had wound up, "to leave it beyond to-morrow."

That, definitely, with ten words more, was what had passed — he feeling all the while how any sort of begging-off would only magnify it. He might get on with things as they were, but he must do anything rather than magnify. Besides which it was pitiful to make her beg of him. He WAS making her — she had begged; and this, for a special sensibility in him, didn't at all do. That was accordingly, in fine, how they had come to where they were: he was engaged, as hard as possible, in the policy of not magnifying. He had kept this up even on her making a point — and as if it were almost the whole point — that Maggie of course was not to have an idea. Half the interest of the thing at least would be that she shouldn't suspect; therefore he was completely to keep it from her — as Charlotte on her side would — that they had been anywhere at all together or had so much as seen each other for five minutes alone. The absolute secrecy of their little excursion was in short of the essence; she appealed to his kindness to let her feel that he didn't betray her. There had been something, frankly, a little disconcerting in such an appeal at such an hour, on the very eve of his nuptials: it was one thing to have met the girl casually at Mrs. Assingham's and another to arrange with her thus for a morning practically as private as their old mornings in Rome and practically not less intimate. He had immediately told Maggie, the same evening, of the minutes that had passed between them in Cadogan Place — though not mentioning those of Mrs. Assingham's absence any more than he mentioned the fact of what their friend had then, with such small delay, proposed. But what had briefly checked his assent to any present, to any positive making of mystery — what had made him, while they stood at the top of the stairs, demur just long enough for her to notice it — was the sense of the resemblance of the little plan before him to occasions, of the past, from which he was quite disconnected, from which he could only desire to be. This was like beginning something over, which was the last thing he wanted. The strength, the beauty of his actual position was in its being wholly a fresh start, was that what it began would be new altogether. These items of his consciousness had clustered so quickly that by the time Charlotte read them in his face he was in presence of what they amounted to. She had challenged them as soon as read them, had met them with a "Do you want then to go and tell her?" that had somehow made them ridiculous. It had made him, promptly, fall back on minimizing it — that is on minimizing "fuss." Apparent scruples were, obviously, fuss, and he had on the spot clutched, in the light of this truth, at the happy principle that would meet every case.

This principle was simply to be, with the girl, always simple — and with the very last simplicity. That would cover everything. It had covered, then and there, certainly, his immediate submission to the sight of what was clearest. This was, really, that what she asked was little compared to what she gave. What she gave touched him, as she faced him, for it was the full tune of her renouncing. She really renounced — renounced everything, and without even insisting now on what it had all been for her. Her only insistence was her insistence on the small matter of their keeping their appointment to themselves. That, in exchange for "everything," everything she gave up, was verily but a trifle. He let himself accordingly be guided; he so soon assented, for enlightened indulgence, to any particular turn she might wish the occasion to take, that the stamp of her preference had been well applied to it even while they were still in the Park. The application in fact presently required that they should sit down a little, really to see where they were; in obedience to which propriety they had some ten minutes, of a quality quite distinct, in a couple of penny-chairs under one of the larger trees. They had taken, for their walk, to the cropped, rain-freshened grass, after finding it already dry; and the chairs, turned away from the broad alley, the main drive and the aspect of Park Lane, looked across the wide reaches of green which seemed in a manner to refine upon their freedom. They helped Charlotte thus to make her position — her temporary position — still more clear, and it was for this purpose, obviously, that, abruptly, on seeing her opportunity, she sat down. He stood for a little before her, as if to mark the importance of not wasting time, the importance she herself had previously insisted on; but after she had said a few words it was impossible for him not to resort again to good-nature. He marked as he could, by this concession, that if he had finally met her first proposal for what would be "amusing" in it, so any idea she might have would contribute to that effect. He had consequently — in all consistency — to treat it as amusing that she reaffirmed, and reaffirmed again, the truth that was HER truth.

"I don't care what you make of it, and I don't ask anything whatever of you — anything but this. I want to have said it — that's all; I want not to have failed to say it. To see you once and be with you, to be as we are now and as we used to be, for one small hour — or say for two — that's what I have had for weeks in my head. I mean, of course, to get it BEFORE — before what you're going to do. So, all the while, you see," she went on with her eyes on him, "it was a question for me if I should be able to manage it in time. If I couldn't have come now I probably shouldn't have come at all — perhaps even ever. Now that I'm here I shall stay, but there were moments, over there, when I despaired. It wasn't easy — there were reasons; but it was either this or nothing. So I didn't struggle, you see, in vain. AFTER — oh, I didn't want that! I don't mean," she smiled, "that it wouldn't have been delightful to see you even then — to see you at any time; but I would never have come for it. This is different. This is what I wanted. This is what I've got. This is what I shall always have. This is what I should have missed, of course," she pursued, "if you had chosen to make me miss it. If you had thought me horrid, had refused to come, I should, naturally, have been immensely 'sold.' I had to take the risk. Well, you're all I could have hoped. That's what I was to have said. I didn't want simply to get my time with you, but I wanted you to know. I wanted you" — she kept it up, slowly, softly, with a small tremor of voice, but without the least failure of sense or sequence— "I wanted you to understand. I wanted you, that is, to hear. I don't care, I think, whether you understand or not. If I ask nothing of you I don't — I mayn't — ask even so much as that. What you may think of me — that doesn't in the least matter. What I want is that it shall always be with you — so that you'll never be able quite to get rid of it — that I DID. I won't say that you did — you may make as little of that as you like. But that I was here with you where we are and as we are — I just saying this. Giving myself, in other words, away — and perfectly willing to do it for nothing. That's all."

She paused as if her demonstration was complete — yet, for the moment, without moving; as if in fact to give it a few minutes to sink in; into the listening air, into the watching space, into the conscious hospitality of nature, so far as nature was, all Londonised, all vulgarised, with them there; or even, for that matter, into her own open ears, rather than into the attention of her passive and prudent friend. His attention had done all that attention could do; his handsome, slightly anxious, yet still more definitely "amused" face sufficiently played its part. He clutched, however, at what he could best clutch at — the fact that she let him off, definitely let him off. She let him off, it seemed, even from so much as answering; so that while he smiled back at her in return for her information he felt his lips remain closed to the successive vaguenesses of rejoinder, of objection, that rose for him from within. Charlotte herself spoke again at last— "You may want to know what I get by it. But that's my own affair." He really didn't want to know even this — or continued, for the safest plan, quite to behave as if he didn't; which prolonged the mere dumbness of diversion in which he had taken

refuge. He was glad when, finally — the point she had wished to make seeming established to her satisfaction — they brought to what might pass for a close the moment of his life at which he had had least to say. Movement and progress, after this, with more impersonal talk, were naturally a relief; so that he was not again, during their excursion, at a loss for the right word. The air had been, as it were, cleared; they had their errand itself to discuss, and the opportunities of London, the sense of the wonderful place, the pleasures of prowling there, the question of shops, of possibilities, of particular objects, noticed by each in previous prowls. Each professed surprise at the extent of the other's knowledge; the Prince in especial wondered at his friend's possession of her London. He had rather prized his own possession, the guidance he could really often give a cabman; it was a whim of his own, a part of his Anglomania, and congruous with that feature, which had, after all, so much more surface than depth. When his companion, with the memory of other visits and other rambles, spoke of places he hadn't seen and things he didn't know, he actually felt again — as half the effect — just a shade humiliated. He might even have felt a trifle annoyed — if it hadn't been, on this spot, for his being, even more, interested. It was a fresh light on Charlotte and on her curious world-quality, of which, in Rome, he had had his due sense, but which clearly would show larger on the big London stage. Rome was, in comparison, a village, a family-party, a little old-world spinnet for the fingers of one hand. By the time they reached the Marble Arch it was almost as if she were showing him a new side, and that, in fact, gave amusement a new and a firmer basis. The right tone would be easy for putting himself in her hands. Should they disagree a little — frankly and fairly — about directions and chances, values and authenticities, the situation would be quite gloriously saved. They were none the less, as happened, much of one mind on the article of their keeping clear of resorts with which Maggie would be acquainted. Charlotte recalled it as a matter of course, named it in time as a condition — they would keep away from any place to which he had already been with Maggie.

This made indeed a scant difference, for though he had during the last month done few things so much as attend his future wife on her making of purchases, the antiquarii, as he called them with Charlotte, had not been the great affair. Except in Bond Street, really, Maggie had had no use for them: her situation indeed, in connection with that order of traffic, was full of consequences produced by her father's. Mr. Verver, one of the great collectors of the world, hadn't left his daughter to prowl for herself; he had little to do with shops, and was mostly, as a purchaser, approached privately and from afar. Great people, all over Europe, sought introductions to him; high personages, incredibly high, and more of them than would ever be known, solemnly sworn as everyone was, in such cases, to discretion, high personages made up to him as the one man on the short authentic list likely to give the price. It had therefore been easy to settle, as they walked, that the tracks of the Ververs, daughter's as well as father's, were to be avoided; the importance only was that their talk about it led for a moment to the first words they had as yet exchanged on the subject of Maggie. Charlotte, still in the Park, proceeded to them — for it was she who began — with a serenity of appreciation that was odd, certainly, as a sequel to her words of ten minutes before. This was another note on her — what he would have called another light — for her companion, who, though without giving a sign, admired, for what it was, the simplicity of her transition, a transition that took no trouble either to trace or to explain itself. She paused again an instant, on the grass, to make it; she stopped before him with a sudden "Anything of course, dear as she is, will do for her. I mean if I were to give her a pin-cushion from the Baker-Street Bazaar."

"That's exactly what *I* meant" — the Prince laughed out this allusion to their snatch of talk in Portland Place. "It's just what I suggested."

She took, however, no notice of the reminder; she went on in her own way. "But it isn't a reason. In that case one would never do anything for her. I mean," Charlotte explained, "if one took advantage of her character."

"Of her character?"

"We mustn't take advantage of her character," the girl, again unheeding, pursued. "One mustn't, if not for HER, at least for one's self. She saves one such trouble."

She had spoken thoughtfully, with her eyes on her friend's; she might have been talking, preoccupied and practical, of someone with whom he was comparatively unconnected. "She certainly GIVES one no trouble," said the Prince. And then as if this were perhaps ambiguous or inadequate: "She's not selfish — God forgive her! — enough."

"That's what I mean," Charlotte instantly said. "She's not selfish enough. There's nothing, absolutely, that

one NEED do for her. She's so modest," she developed— "she doesn't miss things. I mean if you love her — or, rather, I should say, if she loves you. She lets it go."

The Prince frowned a little — as a tribute, after all, to seriousness. "She lets what — ?"

"Anything — anything that you might do and that you don't. She lets everything go but her own disposition to be kind to you. It's of herself that she asks efforts — so far as she ever HAS to ask them. She hasn't, much. She does everything herself. And that's terrible."

The Prince had listened; but, always with propriety, he didn't commit himself. "Terrible?"

"Well, unless one is almost as good as she. It makes too easy terms for one. It takes stuff, within one, so far as one's decency is concerned, to stand it. And nobody," Charlotte continued in the same manner, "is decent enough, good enough, to stand it — not without help from religion, or something of that kind. Not without prayer and fasting — that is without taking great care. Certainly," she said, "such people as you and I are not."

The Prince, obligingly, thought an instant. "Not good enough to stand it?"

"Well, not good enough not rather to feel the strain. We happen each, I think, to be of the kind that are easily spoiled."

Her friend, again, for propriety, followed the argument. "Oh, I don't know. May not one's affection for her do something more for one's decency, as you call it, than her own generosity — her own affection, HER 'decency' — has the unfortunate virtue to undo?"

"Ah, of course it must be all in that."

But she had made her question, all the same, interesting to him. "What it comes to — one can see what you mean — is the way she believes in one. That is if she believes at all."

"Yes, that's what it comes to," said Charlotte Stant.

"And why," he asked, almost soothingly, "should it be terrible?" He couldn't, at the worst, see that.

"Because it's always so — the idea of having to pity people."

"Not when there's also, with it, the idea of helping them."

"Yes, but if we can't help them?"

"We CAN — we always can. That is," he competently added, "if we care for them. And that's what we're talking about."

"Yes" — she on the whole assented. "It comes back then to our absolutely refusing to be spoiled."

"Certainly. But everything," the Prince laughed as they went on— "all your 'decency,' I mean — comes back to that."

She walked beside him a moment. "It's just what *I* meant," she then reasonably said.

VI

The man in the little shop in which, well after this, they lingered longest, the small but interesting dealer in the Bloomsbury street who was remarkable for an insistence not importunate, inasmuch as it was mainly mute, but singularly, intensely coercive — this personage fixed on his visitors an extraordinary pair of eyes and looked from one to the other while they considered the object with which he appeared mainly to hope to tempt them. They had come to him last, for their time was nearly up; an hour of it at least, from the moment of their getting into a hansom at the Marble Arch, having yielded no better result than the amusement invoked from the first. The amusement, of course, was to have consisted in seeking, but it had also involved the idea of finding; which latter necessity would have been obtrusive only if they had found too soon. The question at present was if they were finding, and they put it to each other, in the Bloomsbury shop, while they enjoyed the undiverted attention of the shopman. He was clearly the master, and devoted to his business — the essence of which, in his conception, might precisely have been this particular secret that he possessed for worrying the customer so little that it fairly made for their relations a sort of solemnity. He had not many things, none of the redundancy of "rot" they had elsewhere seen, and our friends had, on entering, even had the sense of a muster so scant that, as high values obviously wouldn't reign, the effect might be almost pitiful. Then their impression had changed; for, though the show was of small pieces, several taken from the little window and others extracted from a cupboard behind the counter — dusky, in the rather low-browed place, despite its glass doors — each bid for their attention spoke, however modestly, for itself, and the pitch of their entertainer's pretensions was promptly enough given. His array was heterogeneous and not at all imposing; still, it differed agreeably from what they had hitherto seen.

Charlotte, after the incident, was to be full of impressions, of several of which, later on, she gave her companion — always in the interest of their amusement — the benefit; and one of the impressions had been that the man himself was the greatest curiosity they had looked at. The Prince was to reply to this that he himself hadn't looked at him; as, precisely, in the general connection, Charlotte had more than once, from other days, noted, for his advantage, her consciousness of how, below a certain social plane, he never SAW. One kind of shopman was just like another to him — which was oddly inconsequent on the part of a mind that, where it did notice, noticed so much. He took throughout, always, the meaner sort for granted — the night of their meanness, or whatever name one might give it for him, made all his cats grey. He didn't, no doubt, want to hurt them, but he imaged them no more than if his eyes acted only for the level of his own high head. Her own vision acted for every relation — this he had seen for himself: she remarked beggars, she remembered servants, she recognised cabmen; she had often distinguished beauty, when out with him, in dirty children; she had admired "type" in faces at hucksters' stalls. Therefore, on this occasion, she had found their antiquario interesting; partly because he cared so for his things, and partly because he cared — well, so for them. "He likes his things — he loves them," she was to say; "and it isn't only — it isn't perhaps even at all — that he loves to sell them. I think he would love to keep them if he could; and he prefers, at any rate, to sell them to right people. We, clearly, were right people — he knows them when he sees them; and that's why, as I say, you could make out, or at least *I* could, that he cared for us. Didn't you see" — she was to ask it with an insistence— "the way he looked at us and took us in? I doubt if either of us have ever been so well looked at before. Yes, he'll remember us" — she was to profess herself convinced of that almost to uneasiness. "But it was after all" — this was perhaps reassuring— "because, given his taste, since he HAS taste, he was pleased with us, he was struck — he had ideas about us. Well, I should think people might; we're beautiful — aren't we? — and he knows. Then, also, he has his way; for that way of saying nothing with his lips when he's all the while pressing you so with his face, which shows how he knows you feel it — that is a regular way."

Of decent old gold, old silver, old bronze, of old chased and jewelled artistry, were the objects that, successively produced, had ended by numerously dotting the counter, where the shopman's slim, light fingers, with neat nails, touched them at moments, briefly, nervously, tenderly, as those of a chess-player rest, a few seconds, over the board, on a figure he thinks he may move and then may not: small florid ancientries, ornaments, pendants, lockets, brooches, buckles, pretexts for dim brilliants, bloodless rubies, pearls either too large or too opaque for value; miniatures mounted with diamonds that had ceased to dazzle; snuffboxes presented to — or by — the too-questionable great; cups, trays, taper-stands, suggestive of pawn-tickets, archaic and brown, that would themselves, if preserved, have been prized curiosities. A few commemorative

medals, of neat outline but dull reference; a classic monument or two, things of the first years of the century; things consular, Napoleonic, temples, obelisks, arches, tinily re-embodied, completed the discreet cluster; in which, however, even after tentative reinforcement from several quaint rings, intaglios, amethysts, carbuncles, each of which had found a home in the ancient sallow satin of some weakly-snapping little box, there was, in spite of the due proportion of faint poetry, no great force of persuasion. They looked, the visitors, they touched, they vaguely pretended to consider, but with scepticism, so far as courtesy permitted, in the quality of their attention. It was impossible they shouldn't, after a little, tacitly agree as to the absurdity of carrying to Maggie a token from such a stock. It would be — that was the difficulty — pretentious without being "good"; too usual, as a treasure, to have been an inspiration of the giver, and yet too primitive to be taken as tribute welcome on any terms. They had been out more than two hours and, evidently, had found nothing. It forced from Charlotte a kind of admission.

"It ought, really, if it should be a thing of this sort, to take its little value from having belonged to one's self."

"Ecco!" said the Prince — just triumphantly enough. "There you are."

Behind the dealer were sundry small cupboards in the wall. Two or three of these Charlotte had seen him open, so that her eyes found themselves resting on those he had not visited. But she completed her admission. "There's nothing here she could wear."

It was only after a moment that her companion rejoined. "Is there anything — do you think — that you could?"

It made her just start. She didn't, at all events, look at the objects; she but looked for an instant very directly at him. "No."

"Ah!" the Prince quietly exclaimed.

"Would it be," Charlotte asked, "your idea to offer me something?"

"Well, why not — as a small ricordo."

"But a ricordo of what?"

"Why, of 'this' — as you yourself say. Of this little hunt."

"Oh, I say it — but hasn't my whole point been that I don't ask you to. Therefore," she demanded — but smiling at him now— "where's the logic?"

"Oh, the logic — !" he laughed.

"But logic's everything. That, at least, is how I feel it. A ricordo from you — from you to me — is a ricordo of nothing. It has no reference."

"Ah, my dear!" he vaguely protested. Their entertainer, meanwhile, stood there with his eyes on them, and the girl, though at this minute more interested in her passage with her friend than in anything else, again met his gaze. It was a comfort to her that their foreign tongue covered what they said — and they might have appeared of course, as the Prince now had one of the snuffboxes in his hand, to be discussing a purchase.

"You don't refer," she went on to her companion. "*I* refer."

He had lifted the lid of his little box and he looked into it hard. "Do you mean by that then that you would be free — ?"

"'Free' — ?"

"To offer me something?"

This gave her a longer pause, and when she spoke again she might have seemed, oddly, to be addressing the dealer. "Would you allow me — ?"

"No," said the Prince into his little box.

"You wouldn't accept it from me?"

"No," he repeated in the same way.

She exhaled a long breath that was like a guarded sigh. "But you've touched an idea that HAS been mine. It's what I've wanted." Then she added: "It was what I hoped."

He put down his box — this had drawn his eyes. He made nothing, clearly, of the little man's attention. "It's what you brought me out for?"

"Well, that's, at any rate," she returned, "my own affair. But it won't do?"

"It won't do, cara mia."

"It's impossible?"

"It's impossible." And he took up one of the brooches.

She had another pause, while the shopman only waited. “If I were to accept from you one of these charming little ornaments as you suggest, what should I do with it?”

He was perhaps at last a little irritated; he even — as if HE might understand — looked vaguely across at their host. “Wear it, per Bacco!”

“Where then, please? Under my clothes?”

“Wherever you like. But it isn’t then, if you will,” he added, “worth talking about.”

“It’s only worth talking about, mio caro,” she smiled, “from your having begun it. My question is only reasonable — so that your idea may stand or fall by your answer to it. If I should pin one of these things on for you would it be, to your mind, that I might go home and show it to Maggie as your present?”

They had had between them often in talk the refrain, jocosely, descriptively applied, of “old Roman.” It had been, as a pleasantry, in the other time, his explanation to her of everything; but nothing, truly, had even seemed so old-Roman as the shrug in which he now indulged. “Why in the world not?”

“Because — on our basis — it would be impossible to give her an account of the pretext.”

“The pretext — ?” He wondered.

“The occasion. This ramble that we shall have had together and that we’re not to speak of.”

“Oh yes,” he said after a moment “I remember we’re not to speak of it.”

“That of course you’re pledged to. And the one thing, you see, goes with the other. So you don’t insist.”

He had again, at random, laid back his trinket; with which he quite turned to her, a little wearily at last — even a little impatiently. “I don’t insist.”

It disposed for the time of the question, but what was next apparent was that it had seen them no further. The shopman, who had not stirred, stood there in his patience — which, his mute intensity helping, had almost the effect of an ironic comment. The Prince moved to the glass door and, his back to the others, as with nothing more to contribute, looked — though not less patiently — into the street. Then the shopman, for Charlotte, momentously broke silence. “You’ve seen, disgraziatamente, signora principessa,” he sadly said, “too much” — and it made the Prince face about. For the effect of the momentous came, if not from the sense, from the sound of his words; which was that of the suddenest, sharpest Italian. Charlotte exchanged with her friend a glance that matched it, and just for the minute they were held in check. But their glance had, after all, by that time, said more than one thing; had both exclaimed on the apprehension, by the wretch, of their intimate conversation, let alone of her possible, her impossible, title, and remarked, for mutual reassurance, that it didn’t, all the same, matter. The Prince remained by the door, but immediately addressing the speaker from where he stood.

“You’re Italian then, are you?”

But the reply came in English. “Oh dear no.”

“You’re English?”

To which the answer was this time, with a smile, in briefest Italian. “Che!” The dealer waived the question — he practically disposed of it by turning straightway toward a receptacle to which he had not yet resorted and from which, after unlocking it, he extracted a square box, of some twenty inches in height, covered with worn-looking leather. He placed the box on the counter, pushed back a pair of small hooks, lifted the lid and removed from its nest a drinking-vessel larger than a common cup, yet not of exorbitant size, and formed, to appearance, either of old fine gold or of some material once richly gilt. He handled it with tenderness, with ceremony, making a place for it on a small satin mat. “My Golden Bowl,” he observed — and it sounded, on his lips, as if it said everything. He left the important object — for as “important” it did somehow present itself — to produce its certain effect. Simple, but singularly elegant, it stood on a circular foot, a short pedestal with a slightly spreading base, and, though not of signal depth, justified its title by the charm of its shape as well as by the tone of its surface. It might have been a large goblet diminished, to the enhancement of its happy curve, by half its original height. As formed of solid gold it was impressive; it seemed indeed to warn off the prudent admirer. Charlotte, with care, immediately took it up, while the Prince, who had after a minute shifted his position again, regarded it from a distance.

It was heavier than Charlotte had thought. “Gold, really gold?” she asked of their companion.

He hesitated. “Look a little, and perhaps you’ll make out.”

She looked, holding it up in both her fine hands, turning it to the light. “It may be cheap for what it is, but it will be dear, I’m afraid, for me.”

“Well,” said the man, “I can part with it for less than its value. I got it, you see, for less.”

"For how much then?"

Again he waited, always with his serene stare. "Do you like it then?"

Charlotte turned to her friend. "Do YOU like it?" He came no nearer; he looked at their companion. "Cos'e?"

"Well, signori miei, if you must know, it's just a perfect crystal."

"Of course we must know, per Dio!" said the Prince. But he turned away again — he went back to his glass door.

Charlotte set down the bowl; she was evidently taken. "Do you mean it's cut out of a single crystal?"

"If it isn't I think I can promise you that you'll never find any joint or any piecing."

She wondered. "Even if I were to scrape off the gold?"

He showed, though with due respect, that she amused him. "You couldn't scrape it off — it has been too well put on; put on I don't know when and I don't know how. But by some very fine old worker and by some beautiful old process."

Charlotte, frankly charmed with the cup, smiled back at him now. "A lost art?"

"Call it a lost art,"

"But of what time then is the whole thing?"

"Well, say also of a lost time."

The girl considered. "Then if it's so precious, how comes it to be cheap?"

Her interlocutor once more hung fire, but by this time the Prince had lost patience. "I'll wait for you out in the air," he said to his companion, and, though he spoke without irritation, he pointed his remark by passing immediately into the street, where, during the next minutes, the others saw him, his back to the shopwindow, philosophically enough hover and light a fresh cigarette. Charlotte even took, a little, her time; she was aware of his funny Italian taste for London street-life.

Her host meanwhile, at any rate, answered her question. "Ah, I've had it a long time without selling it. I think I must have been keeping it, madam, for you."

"You've kept it for me because you've thought I mightn't see what's the matter with it?"

He only continued to face her — he only continued to appear to follow the play of her mind. "What IS the matter with it?"

"Oh, it's not for me to say; it's for you honestly to tell me. Of course I know something must be."

"But if it's something you can't find out, isn't it as good as if it were nothing?"

"I probably SHOULD find out as soon as I had paid for it."

"Not," her host lucidly insisted, "if you hadn't paid too much."

"What do you call," she asked, "little enough?"

"Well, what should you say to fifteen pounds?"

"I should say," said Charlotte with the utmost promptitude, "that it's altogether too much."

The dealer shook his head slowly and sadly, but firmly. "It's my price, madam — and if you admire the thing I think it really might be yours. It's not too much. It's too little. It's almost nothing. I can't go lower."

Charlotte, wondering, but resisting, bent over the bowl again. "Then it's impossible. It's more than I can afford."

"Ah," the man returned, "one can sometimes afford for a present more than one can afford for one's self." He said it so coaxingly that she found herself going on without, as might be said, putting him in his place. "Oh, of course it would be only for a present — !"

"Then it would be a lovely one."

"Does one make a present," she asked, "of an object that contains, to one's knowledge, a flaw?"

"Well, if one knows of it one has only to mention it. The good faith," the man smiled, "is always there."

"And leave the person to whom one gives the thing, you mean, to discover it?"

"He wouldn't discover it — if you're speaking of a gentleman."

"I'm not speaking of anyone in particular," Charlotte said.

"Well, whoever it might be. He might know — and he might try. But he wouldn't find."

She kept her eyes on him as if, though unsatisfied, mystified, she yet had a fancy for the bowl. "Not even if the thing should come to pieces?" And then as he was silent: "Not even if he should have to say to me 'The Golden Bowl is broken'?"

He was still silent; after which he had his strangest smile. "Ah, if anyone should WANT to smash it — !"

She laughed; she almost admired the little man's expression. "You mean one could smash it with a hammer?"

"Yes; if nothing else would do. Or perhaps even by dashing it with violence — say upon a marble floor."

"Oh, marble floors!" But she might have been thinking — for they were a connection, marble floors; a connection with many things: with her old Rome, and with his; with the palaces of his past, and, a little, of hers; with the possibilities of his future, with the sumptuosities of his marriage, with the wealth of the Ververs. All the same, however, there were other things; and they all together held for a moment her fancy. "Does crystal then break — when it IS crystal? I thought its beauty was its hardness."

Her friend, in his way, discriminated. "Its beauty is its BEING crystal. But its hardness is certainly, its safety. It doesn't break," he went on, "like vile glass. It splits — if there is a split."

"Ah!" — Charlotte breathed with interest. "If there is a split." And she looked down again at the bowl. "There IS a split, eh? Crystal does split, eh?"

"On lines and by laws of its own."

"You mean if there's a weak place?"

For all answer, after an hesitation, he took the bowl up again, holding it aloft and tapping it with a key. It rang with the finest, sweetest sound. "Where is the weak place?"

She then did the question justice. "Well, for ME, only the price. I'm poor, you see — very poor. But I thank you and I'll think." The Prince, on the other side of the shop-window, had finally faced about and, as to see if she hadn't done, was trying to reach, with his eyes, the comparatively dim interior. "I like it," she said — "I want it. But I must decide what I can do."

The man, not ungraciously, resigned himself. "Well, I'll keep it for you."

The small quarter-of-an-hour had had its marked oddity — this she felt even by the time the open air and the Bloomsbury aspects had again, in their protest against the truth of her gathered impression, made her more or less their own. Yet the oddity might have been registered as small as compared to the other effect that, before they had gone much further, she had, with her companion, to take account of. This latter was simply the effect of their having, by some tacit logic, some queer inevitability, quite dropped the idea of a continued pursuit. They didn't say so, but it was on the line of giving up Maggie's present that they practically proceeded — the line of giving it up without more reference to it. The Prince's first reference was in fact quite independently made. "I hope you satisfied yourself, before you had done, of what was the matter with that bowl."

"No indeed, I satisfied myself of nothing. Of nothing at least but that the more I looked at it the more I liked it, and that if you weren't so unaccommodating this would be just the occasion for your giving me the pleasure of accepting it."

He looked graver for her, at this, than he had looked all the morning. "Do you propose it seriously — without wishing to play me a trick?"

She wondered. "What trick would it be?"

He looked at her harder. "You mean you really don't know?"

"But know what?"

"Why, what's the matter with it. You didn't see, all the while?"

She only continued, however, to stare. "How could you see — out in the street?"

"I saw before I went out. It was because I saw that I did go out. I didn't want to have another scene with you, before that rascal, and I judged you would presently guess for yourself."

"Is he a rascal?" Charlotte asked. "His price is so moderate." She waited but a moment. "Five pounds. Really so little."

"Five pounds?"

He continued to look at her. "Five pounds."

He might have been doubting her word, but he was only, it appeared, gathering emphasis. "It would be dear — to make a gift of — at five shillings. If it had cost you even but five pence I wouldn't take it from you."

"Then," she asked, "what IS the matter?"

"Why, it has a crack."

It sounded, on his lips, so sharp, it had such an authority, that she almost started, while her colour, at the word, rose. It was as if he had been right, though his assurance was wonderful. "You answer for it without

having looked?"

"I did look. I saw the object itself. It told its story. No wonder it's cheap."

"But it's exquisite," Charlotte, as if with an interest in it now made even tenderer and stranger, found herself moved to insist.

"Of course it's exquisite. That's the danger." Then a light visibly came to her — a light in which her friend suddenly and intensely showed. The reflection of it, as she smiled at him, was in her own face. "The danger — I see — is because you're superstitious."

"Per Dio, I'm superstitious! A crack is a crack — and an omen's an omen."

"You'd be afraid — ?"

"Per Bacco!"

"For your happiness?"

"For my happiness."

"For your safety?"

"For my safety."

She just paused. "For your marriage?"

"For my marriage. For everything."

She thought again. "Thank goodness then that if there BE a crack we know it! But if we may perish by cracks in things that we don't know — !" And she smiled with the sadness of it. "We can never then give each other anything."

He considered, but he met it. "Ah, but one does know. *I* do, at least — and by instinct. I don't fail. That will always protect me."

It was funny, the way he said such things; yet she liked him, really, the more for it. They fell in for her with a general, or rather with a special, vision. But she spoke with a mild despair.

"What then will protect ME?"

"Where I'm concerned *I* will. From me at least you've nothing to fear," he now quite amiably responded. "Anything you consent to accept from me—" But he paused.

"Well?"

"Well, shall be perfect."

"That's very fine," she presently answered. "It's vain, after all, for you to talk of my accepting things when you'll accept nothing from me."

Ah, THERE, better still, he could meet her. "You attach an impossible condition. That, I mean, of my keeping your gift so to myself."

Well, she looked, before him there, at the condition — then, abruptly, with a gesture, she gave it up. She had a headshake of disenchantment — so far as the idea had appealed to her. It all appeared too difficult. "Oh, my 'condition' — I don't hold to it. You may cry it on the housetops — anything I ever do."

"Ah well, then — !" This made, he laughed, all the difference.

But it was too late. "Oh, I don't care now! I SHOULD have liked the Bowl. But if that won't do there's nothing."

He considered this; he took it in, looking graver again; but after a moment he qualified. "Yet I shall want some day to give you something."

She wondered at him. "What day?"

"The day you marry. For you WILL marry. You must — SERIOUSLY — marry."

She took it from him, but it determined in her the only words she was to have uttered, all the morning, that came out as if a spring had been pressed. "To make you feel better?"

"Well," he replied frankly, wonderfully— "it will. But here," he added, "is your hansom."

He had signalled — the cab was charging. She put out no hand for their separation, but she prepared to get in. Before she did so, however, she said what had been gathering while she waited. "Well, I would marry, I think, to have something from you in all freedom."

PART SECOND

VII

Adam Verver, at Fawns, that autumn Sunday, might have been observed to open the door of the billiard-room with a certain freedom — might have been observed, that is, had there been a spectator in the field. The justification of the push he had applied, however, and of the push, equally sharp, that, to shut himself in, he again applied — the ground of this energy was precisely that he might here, however briefly, find himself alone, alone with the handful of letters, newspapers and other unopened missives, to which, during and since breakfast, he had lacked opportunity to give an eye. The vast, square, clean apartment was empty, and its large clear windows looked out into spaces of terrace and garden, of park and woodland and shining artificial lake, of richly-condensed horizon, all dark blue upland and church-towered village and strong cloudshadow, which were, together, a thing to create the sense, with everyone else at church, of one's having the world to one's self. We share this world, none the less, for the hour, with Mr. Verver; the very fact of his striking, as he would have said, for solitude, the fact of his quiet flight, almost on tiptoe, through tortuous corridors, investing him with an interest that makes our attention — tender indeed almost to compassion — qualify his achieved isolation. For it may immediately be mentioned that this amiable man bethought himself of his personal advantage, in general, only when it might appear to him that other advantages, those of other persons, had successfully put in their claim. It may be mentioned also that he always figured other persons — such was the law of his nature — as a numerous array, and that, though conscious of but a single near tie, one affection, one duty deepest-rooted in his life, it had never, for many minutes together, been his portion not to feel himself surrounded and committed, never quite been his refreshment to make out where the many-coloured human appeal, represented by gradations of tint, diminishing concentric zones of intensity, of importunity, really faded to the blessed impersonal whiteness for which his vision sometimes ached. It shaded off, the appeal — he would have admitted that; but he had as yet noted no point at which it positively stopped.

Thus had grown in him a little habit — his innermost secret, not confided even to Maggie, though he felt she understood it, as she understood, to his view, everything — thus had shaped itself the innocent trick of occasionally making believe that he had no conscience, or at least that blankness, in the field of duty, did reign for an hour; a small game to which the few persons near enough to have caught him playing it, and of whom Mrs. Assingham, for instance, was one, attached indulgently that idea of quaintness, quite in fact that charm of the pathetic, involved in the preservation by an adult of one of childhood's toys. When he took a rare moment "off," he did so with the touching, confessing eyes of a man of forty-seven caught in the act of handling a relic of infancy — sticking on the head of a broken soldier or trying the lock of a wooden gun. It was essentially, in him, the IMITATION of depravity — which, for amusement, as might have been, he practised "keeping up." In spite of practice he was still imperfect, for these so artlessly-artful interludes were condemned, by the nature of the case, to brevity. He had fatally stamped himself — it was his own fault — a man who could be interrupted with impunity. The greatest of wonders, moreover, was exactly in this, that so interrupted a man should ever have got, as the phrase was, should above all have got so early, to where he was. It argued a special genius; he was clearly a case of that. The spark of fire, the point of light, sat somewhere in his inward vagueness as a lamp before a shrine twinkles in the dark perspective of a church; and while youth and early middle-age, while the stiff American breeze of example and opportunity were blowing upon it hard, had made of the chamber of his brain a strange workshop of fortune. This establishment, mysterious and almost anonymous, the windows of which, at hours of highest pressure, never seemed, for starers and wonderers, perceptibly to glow, must in fact have been during certain years the scene of an unprecedented, a miraculous white-heat, the receipt for producing which it was practically felt that the master of the forge could not have communicated even with the best intentions.

The essential pulse of the flame, the very action of the cerebral temperature, brought to the highest point, yet extraordinarily contained — these facts themselves were the immensity of the result; they were one with perfection of machinery, they had constituted the kind of acquisitive power engendered and applied, the necessary triumph of all operations. A dim explanation of phenomena once vivid must at all events for the moment suffice us; it being obviously no account of the matter to throw on our friend's amiability alone the weight of the demonstration of his economic history. Amiability, of a truth, is an aid to success; it has even been known to be the principle of large accumulations; but the link, for the mind, is none the less fatally missing between proof, on such a scale, of continuity, if of nothing more insolent, in one field, and accessibility to distraction in every other. Variety of imagination — what is that but fatal, in the world of

affairs, unless so disciplined as not to be distinguished from monotony? Mr. Verver then, for a fresh, full period, a period betraying, extraordinarily, no wasted year, had been inscrutably monotonous behind an iridescent cloud. The cloud was his native envelope — the soft looseness, so to say, of his temper and tone, not directly expressive enough, no doubt, to figure an amplitude of folds, but of a quality unmistakable for sensitive feelers. He was still reduced, in fine, to getting his rare moments with himself by feigning a cynicism. His real inability to maintain the pretence, however, had perhaps not often been better instanced than by his acceptance of the inevitable to-day — his acceptance of it on the arrival, at the end of a quarter-of-an hour, of that element of obligation with which he had all the while known he must reckon. A quarter-of-an-hour of egoism was about as much as he, taking one situation with another, usually got. Mrs. Rance opened the door — more tentatively indeed than he himself had just done; but on the other hand, as if to make up for this, she pushed forward even more briskly on seeing him than he had been moved to do on seeing nobody. Then, with force, it came home to him that he had, definitely, a week before, established a precedent. He did her at least that justice — it was a kind of justice he was always doing someone. He had on the previous Sunday liked to stop at home, and he had exposed himself thereby to be caught in the act. To make this possible, that is, Mrs. Rance had only had to like to do the same — the trick was so easily played. It had not occurred to him to plan in any way for her absence — which would have destroyed, somehow, in principle, the propriety of his own presence. If persons under his roof hadn't a right not to go to church, what became, for a fair mind, of his own right? His subtlest manoeuvre had been simply to change from the library to the billiard-room, it being in the library that his guest, or his daughter's, or the guest of the Miss Lutches — he scarce knew in which light to regard her — had then, and not unnaturally, of course, joined him. It was urged on him by his memory of the duration of the visit she had that time, as it were, paid him, that the law of recurrence would already have got itself enacted. She had spent the whole morning with him, was still there, in the library, when the others came back — thanks to her having been tepid about their taking, Mr. Verver and she, a turn outside. It had been as if she looked on that as a kind of subterfuge — almost as a form of disloyalty. Yet what was it she had in mind, what did she wish to make of him beyond what she had already made, a patient, punctilious host, mindful that she had originally arrived much as a stranger, arrived not at all deliberately or yearningly invited? — so that one positively had her possible susceptibilities the MORE on one's conscience. The Miss Lutches, the sisters from the middle West, were there as friends of Maggie's, friends of the earlier time; but Mrs. Rance was there — or at least had primarily appeared — only as a friend of the Miss Lutches.

This lady herself was not of the middle West — she rather insisted on it — but of New Jersey, Rhode Island or Delaware, one of the smallest and most intimate States: he couldn't remember which, though she insisted too on that. It was not in him — we may say it for him — to go so far as to wonder if their group were next to be recruited by some friend of her own; and this partly because she had struck him, verily, rather as wanting to get the Miss Lutches themselves away than to extend the actual circle, and partly, as well as more essentially, because such connection as he enjoyed with the ironic question in general resided substantially less in a personal use of it than in the habit of seeing it as easy to others. He was so framed by nature as to be able to keep his inconveniences separate from his resentments; though indeed if the sum of these latter had at the most always been small, that was doubtless in some degree a consequence of the fewness of the former. His greatest inconvenience, he would have admitted, had he analyzed, was in finding it so taken for granted that, as he had money, he had force. It pressed upon him hard, and all round, assuredly, this attribution of power. Everyone had need of one's power, whereas one's own need, at the best, would have seemed to be but some trick for not communicating it. The effect of a reserve so merely, so meanly defensive would in most cases, beyond question, sufficiently discredit the cause; wherefore, though it was complicating to be perpetually treated as an infinite agent, the outrage was not the greatest of which a brave man might complain. Complaint, besides, was a luxury, and he dreaded the imputation of greed. The other, the constant imputation, that of being able to "do," would have no ground if he hadn't been, to start with — this was the point — provably luxurious. His lips, somehow, were closed — and by a spring connected moreover with the action of his eyes themselves. The latter showed him what he had done, showed him where he had come out; quite at the top of his hill of difficulty, the tall sharp spiral round which he had begun to wind his ascent at the age of twenty, and the apex of which was a platform looking down, if one would, on the kingdoms of the earth and with standing-room for but half-a-dozen others.

His eyes, in any case, now saw Mrs. Rance approach with an instant failure to attach to the fact any

grossness of avidity of Mrs. Rance's own — or at least to descry any triumphant use even for the luridest impression of her intensity. What was virtually supreme would be her vision of his having attempted, by his desertion of the library, to mislead her — which in point of fact barely escaped being what he had designed. It was not easy for him, in spite of accumulations fondly and funnily regarded as of systematic practice, not now to be ashamed; the one thing comparatively easy would be to gloss over his course. The billiard-room was NOT, at the particular crisis, either a natural or a graceful place for the nominally main occupant of so large a house to retire to — and this without prejudice, either, to the fact that his visitor wouldn't, as he apprehended, explicitly make him a scene. Should she frankly denounce him for a sneak he would simply go to pieces; but he was, after an instant, not afraid of that. Wouldn't she rather, as emphasising their communion, accept and in a manner exploit the anomaly, treat it perhaps as romantic or possibly even as comic? — show at least that they needn't mind even though the vast table, draped in brown holland, thrust itself between them as an expanse of desert sand. She couldn't cross the desert, but she could, and did, beautifully get round it; so that for him to convert it into an obstacle he would have had to cause himself, as in some childish game or unbecoming romp, to be pursued, to be genially hunted. This last was a turn he was well aware the occasion should on no account take; and there loomed before him — for the mere moment — the prospect of her fairly proposing that they should knock about the balls. That danger certainly, it struck him, he should manage in some way to deal with. Why too, for that matter, had he need of defences, material or other? — how was it a question of dangers really to be called such? The deep danger, the only one that made him, as an idea, positively turn cold, would have been the possibility of her seeking him in marriage, of her bringing up between them that terrible issue. Here, fortunately, she was powerless, it being apparently so provable against her that she had a husband in undiminished existence.

She had him, it was true, only in America, only in Texas, in Nebraska, in Arizona or somewhere — somewhere that, at old Fawns House, in the county of Kent, scarcely counted as a definite place at all; it showed somehow, from afar, as so lost, so indistinct and illusory, in the great alkali desert of cheap Divorce. She had him even in bondage, poor man, had him in contempt, had him in remembrance so imperfect as barely to assert itself, but she had him, none the less, in existence unimpeached: the Miss Lutches had seen him in the flesh — as they had appeared eager to mention; though when they were separately questioned their descriptions failed to tally. He would be at the worst, should it come to the worst, Mrs. Rance's difficulty, and he served therefore quite enough as the stout bulwark of anyone else. This was in truth logic without a flaw, yet it gave Mr. Verver less comfort than it ought. He feared not only danger — he feared the idea of danger, or in other words feared, hauntedly, himself. It was above all as a symbol that Mrs. Rance actually rose before him — a symbol of the supreme effort that he should have sooner or later, as he felt, to make. This effort would be to say No — he lived in terror of having to. He should be proposed to at a given moment — it was only a question of time — and then he should have to do a thing that would be extremely disagreeable. He almost wished, on occasion, that he wasn't so sure he WOULD do it. He knew himself, however, well enough not to doubt: he knew coldly, quite bleakly, where he would, at the crisis, draw the line. It was Maggie's marriage and Maggie's finer happiness — happy as he had supposed her before — that had made the difference; he hadn't in the other time, it now seemed to him, had to think of such things. They hadn't come up for him, and it was as if she, positively, had herself kept them down. She had only been his child — which she was indeed as much as ever; but there were sides on which she had protected him as if she were more than a daughter. She had done for him more than he knew — much, and blissfully, as he always HAD known. If she did at present more than ever, through having what she called the change in his life to make up to him for, his situation still, all the same, kept pace with her activity — his situation being simply that there was more than ever to be done.

There had not yet been quite so much, on all the showing, as since their return from their twenty months in America, as since their settlement again in England, experimental though it was, and the consequent sense, now quite established for him, of a domestic air that had cleared and lightened, producing the effect, for their common personal life, of wider perspectives and large waiting spaces. It was as if his son-in-law's presence, even from before his becoming his son-in-law, had somehow filled the scene and blocked the future — very richly and handsomely, when all was said, not at all inconveniently or in ways not to have been desired: inasmuch as though the Prince, his measure now practically taken, was still pretty much the same "big fact," the sky had lifted, the horizon receded, the very foreground itself expanded, quite to match him, quite to keep everything in comfortable scale. At first, certainly, their decent little old-time union, Maggie's and his own,

had resembled a good deal some pleasant public square, in the heart of an old city, into which a great Palladian church, say — something with a grand architectural front — had suddenly been dropped; so that the rest of the place, the space in front, the way round, outside, to the east end, the margin of street and passage, the quantity of over-arching heaven, had been temporarily compromised. Not even then, of a truth, in a manner disconcerting — given, that is, for the critical, or at least the intelligent, eye, the great style of the facade and its high place in its class. The phenomenon that had since occurred, whether originally to have been pronounced calculable or not, had not, naturally, been the miracle of a night, but had taken place so gradually, quietly, easily, that from this vantage of wide, wooded Fawns, with its eighty rooms, as they said, with its spreading park, with its acres and acres of garden and its majesty of artificial lake — though that, for a person so familiar with the "great" ones, might be rather ridiculous — no visibility of transition showed, no violence of adjustment, in retrospect, emerged. The Palladian church was always there, but the piazza took care of itself. The sun stared down in his fulness, the air circulated, and the public not less; the limit stood off, the way round was easy, the east end was as fine, in its fashion, as the west, and there were also side doors for entrance, between the two — large, monumental, ornamental, in their style — as for all proper great churches. By some such process, in fine, had the Prince, for his father-in-law, while remaining solidly a feature, ceased to be, at all ominously, a block.

Mr. Verver, it may further be mentioned, had taken at no moment sufficient alarm to have kept in detail the record of his reassurance; but he would none the less not have been unable, not really have been indisposed, to impart in confidence to the right person his notion of the history of the matter. The right person — it is equally distinct — had not, for this illumination, been wanting, but had been encountered in the form of Fanny Assingham, not for the first time indeed admitted to his counsels, and who would have doubtless at present, in any case, from plenitude of interest and with equal guarantees, repeated his secret. It all came then, the great clearance, from the one prime fact that the Prince, by good fortune, hadn't proved angular. He clung to that description of his daughter's husband as he often did to terms and phrases, in the human, the social connection, that he had found for himself: it was his way to have times of using these constantly, as if they just then lighted the world, or his own path in it, for him — even when for some of his interlocutors they covered less ground. It was true that with Mrs. Assingham he never felt quite sure of the ground anything covered; she disputed with him so little, agreed with him so much, surrounded him with such systematic consideration, such predetermined tenderness, that it was almost — which he had once told her in irritation as if she were nursing a sick baby. He had accused her of not taking him seriously, and she had replied — as from her it couldn't frighten him — that she took him religiously, adoringly. She had laughed again, as she had laughed before, on his producing for her that good right word about the happy issue of his connection with the Prince — with an effect the more odd perhaps as she had not contested its value. She couldn't of course, however, be, at the best, as much in love with his discovery as he was himself. He was so much so that he fairly worked it — to his own comfort; came in fact sometimes near publicly pointing the moral of what might have occurred if friction, so to speak, had occurred. He pointed it frankly one day to the personage in question, mentioned to the Prince the particular justice he did him, was even explicit as to the danger that, in their remarkable relation, they had thus escaped. Oh, if he HAD been angular! — who could say what might THEN have happened? He spoke — and it was the way he had spoken to Mrs. Assingham too — as if he grasped the facts, without exception, for which angularity stood.

It figured for him, clearly, as a final idea, a conception of the last vividness. He might have been signifying by it the sharp corners and hard edges, all the stony pointedness, the grand right geometry of his spreading Palladian church. Just so, he was insensible to no feature of the felicity of a contact that, beguilingly, almost confoundingly, was a contact but with practically yielding lines and curved surfaces. "You're round, my boy," he had said— "you're ALL, you're variously and inexhaustibly round, when you might, by all the chances, have been abominably square. I'm not sure, for that matter," he had added, "that you're not square in the general mass — whether abominably or not. The abomination isn't a question, for you're inveterately round — that's what I mean — in the detail. It's the sort of thing, in you, that one feels — or at least I do — with one's hand. Say you had been formed, all over, in a lot of little pyramidal lozenges like that wonderful side of the Ducal Palace in Venice — so lovely in a building, but so damnable, for rubbing against, in a man, and especially in a near relation. I can see them all from here — each of them sticking out by itself — all the architectural cut diamonds that would have scratched one's softer sides. One would have been scratched by diamonds — doubtless the neatest way if one was to be scratched at all — but one would have been more or

less reduced to a hash. As it is, for living with, you're a pure and perfect crystal. I give you my idea — I think you ought to have it — just as it has come to me." The Prince had taken the idea, in his way, for he was well accustomed, by this time, to taking; and nothing perhaps even could more have confirmed Mr. Verver's account of his surface than the manner in which these golden drops evenly flowed over it. They caught in no interstice, they gathered in no concavity; the uniform smoothness betrayed the dew but by showing for the moment a richer tone. The young man, in other words, unconfusedly smiled — though indeed as if assenting, from principle and habit, to more than he understood. He liked all signs that things were well, but he cared rather less WHY they were.

In regard to the people among whom he had since his marriage been living, the reasons they so frequently gave — so much oftener than he had ever heard reasons given before — remained on the whole the element by which he most differed from them; and his father-in-law and his wife were, after all, only first among the people among whom he had been living. He was never even yet sure of how, at this, that or the other point, he would strike them; they felt remarkably, so often, things he hadn't meant, and missed not less remarkably, and not less often, things he had. He had fallen back on his general explanation— "We haven't the same values;" by which he understood the same measure of importance. His "curves" apparently were important because they had been unexpected, or, still more, unconceived; whereas when one had always, as in his relegated old world, taken curves, and in much greater quantities too, for granted, one was no more surprised at the resulting feasibility of intercourse than one was surprised at being upstairs in a house that had a staircase. He had in fact on this occasion disposed alertly enough of the subject of Mr. Verver's approbation. The promptitude of his answer, we may in fact well surmise, had sprung not a little from a particular kindled remembrance; this had given his acknowledgment its easiest turn. "Oh, if I'm a crystal I'm delighted that I'm a perfect one, for I believe that they sometimes have cracks and flaws — in which case they're to be had very cheap!" He had stopped short of the emphasis it would have given his joke to add that there had been certainly no having HIM cheap; and it was doubtless a mark of the good taste practically reigning between them that Mr. Verver had not, on his side either, taken up the opportunity. It is the latter's relation to such aspects, however, that now most concerns us, and the bearing of his pleased view of this absence of friction upon Amerigo's character as a representative precious object. Representative precious objects, great ancient pictures and other works of art, fine eminent "pieces" in gold, in silver, in enamel, majolica, ivory, bronze, had for a number of years so multiplied themselves round him and, as a general challenge to acquisition and appreciation, so engaged all the faculties of his mind, that the instinct, the particular sharpened appetite of the collector, had fairly served as a basis for his acceptance of the Prince's suit.

Over and above the signal fact of the impression made on Maggie herself, the aspirant to his daughter's hand showed somehow the great marks and signs, stood before him with the high authenticities, he had learned to look for in pieces of the first order. Adam Verver knew, by this time, knew thoroughly; no man in Europe or in America, he privately believed, was less capable, in such estimates, of vulgar mistakes. He had never spoken of himself as infallible — it was not his way; but, apart from the natural affections, he had acquainted himself with no greater joy, of the intimately personal type, than the joy of his originally coming to feel, and all so unexpectedly, that he had in him the spirit of the connoisseur. He had, like many other persons, in the course of his reading, been struck with Keats's sonnet about stout Cortez in the presence of the Pacific; but few persons, probably, had so devoutly fitted the poet's grand image to a fact of experience. It consorted so with Mr. Verver's consciousness of the way in which, at a given moment, he had stared at HIS Pacific, that a couple of perusals of the immortal lines had sufficed to stamp them in his memory. His "peak in Darien" was the sudden hour that had transformed his life, the hour of his perceiving with a mute inward gasp akin to the low moan of apprehensive passion, that a world was left him to conquer and that he might conquer it if he tried. It had been a turning of the page of the book of life — as if a leaf long inert had moved at a touch and, eagerly reversed, had made such a stir of the air as sent up into his face the very breath of the Golden Isles. To rifle the Golden Isles had, on the spot, become the business of his future, and with the sweetness of it — what was most wondrous of all — still more even in the thought than in the act. The thought was that of the affinity of Genius, or at least of Taste, with something in himself — with the dormant intelligence of which he had thus almost violently become aware and that affected him as changing by a mere revolution of the screw his whole intellectual plane. He was equal, somehow, with the great seers, the invokers and encouragers of beauty — and he didn't after all perhaps dangle so far below the great producers and creators. He had been nothing of that kind before-too decidedly, too dreadfully not; but now he saw why

he had been what he had, why he had failed and fallen short even in huge success; now he read into his career, in one single magnificent night, the immense meaning it had waited for.

It was during his first visit to Europe after the death of his wife, when his daughter was ten years old, that the light, in his mind, had so broken — and he had even made out at that time why, on an earlier occasion, the journey of his honeymoon year, it had still been closely covered. He had "bought" then, so far as he had been able, but he had bought almost wholly for the frail, fluttered creature at his side, who had had her fancies, decidedly, but all for the art, then wonderful to both of them, of the Rue de la Paix, the costly authenticities of dressmakers and jewellers. Her flutter — pale disconcerted ghost as she actually was, a broken white flower tied round, almost grotesquely for his present sense, with a huge satin "bow" of the Boulevard — her flutter had been mainly that of ribbons, frills and fine fabrics; all funny, pathetic evidence, for memory, of the bewilderments overtaking them as a bridal pair confronted with opportunity. He could wince, fairly, still, as he remembered the sense in which the poor girl's pressure had, under his fond encouragement indeed, been exerted in favour of purchase and curiosity. These were wandering images, out of the earlier dusk, that threw her back, for his pity, into a past more remote than he liked their common past, their young affection, to appear. It would have had to be admitted, to an insistent criticism, that Maggie's mother, all too strangely, had not so much failed of faith as of the right application of it; since she had exercised it eagerly and restlessly, made it a pretext for innocent perversities in respect to which philosophic time was at, last to reduce all groans to gentleness. And they had loved each other so that his own intelligence, on the higher line, had temporarily paid for it. The futilities, the enormities, the depravities, of decoration and ingenuity, that, before his sense was unsealed, she had made him think lovely! Musing, reconsidering little man that he was, and addicted to silent pleasures — as he was accessible to silent pains — he even sometimes wondered what would have become of his intelligence, in the sphere in which it was to learn more and more exclusively to play, if his wife's influence upon it had not been, in the strange scheme of things, so promptly removed. Would she have led him altogether, attached as he was to her, into the wilderness of mere mistakes? Would she have prevented him from ever scaling his vertiginous Peak? — or would she, otherwise, have been able to accompany him to that eminence, where he might have pointed out to her, as Cortez to HIS companions, the revelation vouchsafed? No companion of Cortez had presumably been a real lady: Mr. Verver allowed that historic fact to determine his inference.

VIII

What was at all events not permanently hidden from him was a truth much less invidious about his years of darkness. It was the strange scheme of things again: the years of darkness had been needed to render possible the years of light. A wiser hand than he at first knew had kept him hard at acquisition of one sort as a perfect preliminary to acquisition of another, and the preliminary would have been weak and wanting if the good faith of it had been less. His comparative blindness had made the good faith, which in its turn had made the soil propitious for the flower of the supreme idea. He had had to LIKE forging and sweating, he had had to like polishing and piling up his arms. They were things at least he had had to believe he liked, just as he had believed he liked transcendent calculation and imaginative gambling all for themselves, the creation of "interests" that were the extinction of other interests, the livid vulgarity, even, of getting in, or getting out, first. That had of course been so far from really the case — with the supreme idea, all the while, growing and striking deep, under everything, in the warm, rich earth. He had stood unknowing, he had walked and worked where it was buried, and the fact itself, the fact of his fortune, would have been a barren fact enough if the first sharp tender shoot had never struggled into day. There on one side was the ugliness his middle time had been spared; there on the other, from all the portents, was the beauty with which his age might still be crowned. He was happier, doubtless, than he deserved; but THAT, when one was happy at all, it was easy to be. He had wrought by devious ways, but he had reached the place, and what would ever have been straighter, in any man's life, than his way, now, of occupying it? It hadn't merely, his plan, all the sanctions of civilization; it was positively civilization condensed, concrete, consummate, set down by his hands as a house on a rock — a house from whose open doors and windows, open to grateful, to thirsty millions, the higher, the highest knowledge would shine out to bless the land. In this house, designed as a gift, primarily, to the people of his adoptive city and native State, the urgency of whose release from the bondage of ugliness he was in a position to measure — in this museum of museums, a palace of art which was to show for compact as a Greek temple was compact, a receptacle of treasures sifted to positive sanctity, his spirit to-day almost altogether lived, making up, as he would have said, for lost time and haunting the portico in anticipation of the final rites.

These would be the "opening exercises," the august dedication of the place. His imagination, he was well aware, got over the ground faster than his judgment; there was much still to do for the production of his first effect. Foundations were laid and walls were rising, the structure of the shell all determined; but raw haste was forbidden him in a connection so intimate with the highest effects of patience and piety; he should belie himself by completing without a touch at least of the majesty of delay a monument to the religion he wished to propagate, the exemplary passion, the passion for perfection at any price. He was far from knowing as yet where he would end, but he was admirably definite as to where he wouldn't begin. He wouldn't begin with a small show — he would begin with a great, and he could scarce have indicated, even had he wished to try, the line of division he had drawn. He had taken no trouble to indicate it to his fellow-citizens, purveyors and consumers, in his own and the circumjacent commonwealths, of comic matter in large lettering, diurnally "set up," printed, published, folded and delivered, at the expense of his presumptuous emulation of the snail. The snail had become for him, under this ironic suggestion, the loveliest beast in nature, and his return to England, of which we are present witnesses, had not been unconnected with the appreciation so determined. It marked what he liked to mark, that he needed, on the matter in question, instruction from no one on earth. A couple of years of Europe again, of renewed nearness to changes and chances, refreshed sensibility to the currents of the market, would fall in with the consistency of wisdom, the particular shade of enlightened conviction, that he wished to observe. It didn't look like much for a whole family to hang about waiting-they being now, since the birth of his grandson, a whole family; and there was henceforth only one ground in all the world, he felt, on which the question of appearance would ever really again count for him. He cared that a work of art of price should "look like" the master to whom it might perhaps be deceitfully attributed; but he had ceased on the whole to know any matter of the rest of life by its looks.

He took life in general higher up the stream; so far as he was not actually taking it as a collector, he was taking it, decidedly, as a grandfather. In the way of precious small pieces he had handled nothing so precious as the Principino, his daughter's first-born, whose Italian designation endlessly amused him and whom he could manipulate and dandle, already almost toss and catch again, as he couldn't a correspondingly rare

morsel of an earlier pate tendre. He could take the small clutching child from his nurse's arms with an iteration grimly discountenanced, in respect to their contents, by the glass doors of high cabinets. Something clearly beatific in this new relation had, moreover, without doubt, confirmed for him the sense that none of his silent answers to public detraction, to local vulgarity, had ever been so legitimately straight as the mere element of attitude — reduce it, he said, to that — in his easy weeks at Fawns. The element of attitude was all he wanted of these weeks, and he was enjoying it on the spot, even more than he had hoped: enjoying it in spite of Mrs. Rance and the Miss Lutches; in spite of the small worry of his belief that Fanny Assingham had really something for him that she was keeping back; in spite of his full consciousness, overflowing the cup like a wine too generously poured, that if he had consented to marry his daughter, and thereby to make, as it were, the difference, what surrounded him now was, exactly, consent vivified, marriage demonstrated, the difference, in fine, definitely made. He could call back his prior, his own wedded consciousness — it was not yet out of range of vague reflection. He had supposed himself, above all he had supposed his wife, as married as anyone could be, and yet he wondered if their state had deserved the name, or their union worn the beauty, in the degree to which the couple now before him carried the matter. In especial since the birth of their boy, in New York — the grand climax of their recent American period, brought to so right an issue — the happy pair struck him as having carried it higher, deeper, further; to where it ceased to concern his imagination, at any rate, to follow them. Extraordinary, beyond question, was one branch of his characteristic mute wonderment — it characterised above all, with its subject before it, his modesty: the strange dim doubt, waking up for him at the end of the years, of whether Maggie's mother had, after all, been capable of the maximum. The maximum of tenderness he meant — as the terms existed for him; the maximum of immersion in the fact of being married. Maggie herself was capable; Maggie herself at this season, was, exquisitely, divinely, the maximum: such was the impression that, positively holding off a little for the practical, the tactful consideration it inspired in him, a respect for the beauty and sanctity of it almost amounting to awe — such was the impression he daily received from her. She was her mother, oh yes — but her mother and something more; it becoming thus a new light for him, and in such a curious way too, that anything more than her mother should prove at this time of day possible.

He could live over again at almost any quiet moment the long process of his introduction to his present interests — an introduction that had depended all on himself, like the "cheek" of the young man who approaches a boss without credentials or picks up an acquaintance, makes even a real friend, by speaking to a passer in the street. HIS real friend, in all the business, was to have been his own mind, with which nobody had put him in relation. He had knocked at the door of that essentially private house, and his call, in truth, had not been immediately answered; so that when, after waiting and coming back, he had at last got in, it was, twirling his hat, as an embarrassed stranger, or, trying his keys, as a thief at night. He had gained confidence only with time, but when he had taken real possession of the place it had been never again to come away. All of which success represented, it must be allowed, his one principle of pride. Pride in the mere original spring, pride in his money, would have been pride in something that had come, in comparison, so easily. The right ground for elation was difficulty mastered, and his difficulty — thanks to his modesty — had been to believe in his facility. THIS was the problem he had worked out to its solution — the solution that was now doing more than all else to make his feet settle and his days flush; and when he wished to feel "good," as they said at American City, he had but to retrace his immense development. That was what the whole thing came back to — that the development had not been somebody's else passing falsely, accepted too ignobly, for his. To think how servile he might have been was absolutely to respect himself, was in fact, as much as he liked, to admire himself, as free. The very finest spring that ever responded to his touch was always there to press — the memory of his freedom as dawning upon him, like a sunrise all pink and silver, during a winter divided between Florence, Rome and Naples some three years after his wife's death. It was the hushed daybreak of the Roman revelation in particular that he could usually best recover, with the way that there, above all, where the princes and Popes had been before him, his divination of his faculty most went to his head. He was a plain American citizen, staying at an hotel where, sometimes, for days together, there were twenty others like him; but no Pope, no prince of them all had read a richer meaning, he believed, into the character of the Patron of Art. He was ashamed of them really, if he wasn't afraid, and he had on the whole never so climbed to the tip-top as in judging, over a perusal of Hermann Grimm, where Julius II and Leo X were "placed" by their treatment of Michael Angelo. Far below the plain American citizen — in the case at least in which this personage happened not to be too plain to be Adam Verver. Going to our friend's head, moreover, some of

the results of such comparisons may doubtless be described as having stayed there. His freedom to see — of which the comparisons were part — what could it do but steadily grow and grow?

It came perhaps even too much to stand to him for ALL freedom — since, for example, it was as much there as ever at the very time of Mrs. Rance's conspiring against him, at Fawns, with the billiard-room and the Sunday morning, on the occasion round which we have perhaps drawn our circle too wide. Mrs. Rance at least controlled practically each other license of the present and the near future: the license to pass the hour as he would have found convenient; the license to stop remembering, for a little, that, though if proposed to — and not only by this aspirant but by any other — he wouldn't prove foolish, the proof of wisdom was none the less, in such a fashion, rather cruelly conditioned; the license in especial to proceed from his letters to his journals and insulate, orientate, himself afresh by the sound, over his gained interval, of the many-mouthed monster the exercise of whose lungs he so constantly stimulated. Mrs. Rance remained with him till the others came back from church, and it was by that time clearer than ever that his ordeal, when it should arrive, would be really most unpleasant. His impression — this was the point — took somehow the form not so much of her wanting to press home her own advantage as of her building better than she knew; that is of her symbolising, with virtual unconsciousness, his own special deficiency, his unfortunate lack of a wife to whom applications could be referred. The applications, the contingencies with which Mrs. Rance struck him as potentially bristling, were not of a sort, really, to be met by one's self. And the possibility of them, when his visitor said, or as good as said, "I'm restrained, you see, because of Mr. Rance, and also because I'm proud and refined; but if it WASN'T for Mr. Rance and for my refinement and my pride!" — the possibility of them, I say, turned to a great murmurous rustle, of a volume to fill the future; a rustle of petticoats, of scented, many-paged letters, of voices as to which, distinguish themselves as they might from each other, it mattered little in what part of the resounding country they had learned to make themselves prevail. The Assinghams and the Miss Lutches had taken the walk, through the park, to the little old church, "on the property," that our friend had often found himself wishing he were able to transport, as it stood, for its simple sweetness, in a glass case, to one of his exhibitory halls; while Maggie had induced her husband, not inveterate in such practices, to make with her, by carriage, the somewhat longer pilgrimage to the nearest altar, modest though it happened to be, of the faith — her own as it had been her mother's, and as Mr. Verver himself had been loosely willing, always, to let it be taken for his — without the solid ease of which, making the stage firm and smooth, the drama of her marriage might not have been acted out.

What at last appeared to have happened, however, was that the divided parties, coming back at the same moment, had met outside and then drifted together, from empty room to room, yet not in mere aimless quest of the pair of companions they had left at home. The quest had carried them to the door of the billiard-room, and their appearance, as it opened to admit them, determined for Adam Verver, in the oddest way in the world, a new and sharp perception. It was really remarkable: this perception expanded, on the spot, as a flower, one of the strangest, might, at a breath, have suddenly opened. The breath, for that matter, was more than anything else, the look in his daughter's eyes — the look with which he SAW her take in exactly what had occurred in her absence: Mrs. Rance's pursuit of him to this remote locality, the spirit and the very form, perfectly characteristic, of his acceptance of the complication — the seal set, in short, unmistakably, on one of Maggie's anxieties. The anxiety, it was true, would have been, even though not imparted, separately shared; for Fanny Assingham's face was, by the same stroke, not at all thickly veiled for him, and a queer light, of a colour quite to match, fairly glittered in the four fine eyes of the Miss Lutches. Each of these persons — counting out, that is, the Prince and the Colonel, who didn't care, and who didn't even see that the others did — knew something, or had at any rate had her idea; the idea, precisely, that this was what Mrs. Rance, artfully biding her time, WOULD do. The special shade of apprehension on the part of the Miss Lutches might indeed have suggested the vision of an energy supremely asserted. It was droll, in truth, if one came to that, the position of the Miss Lutches: they had themselves brought, they had guilelessly introduced Mrs. Rance, strong in the fact of Mr. Rance's having been literally beheld of them; and it was now for them, positively, as if their handful of flowers — since Mrs. Rance was a handful! — had been but the vehicle of a dangerous snake. Mr. Verver fairly felt in the air the Miss Lutches' imputation — in the intensity of which, really, his own propriety might have been involved.

That, none the less, was but a flicker; what made the real difference, as I have hinted, was his mute passage with Maggie. His daughter's anxiety alone had depths, and it opened out for him the wider that it was altogether new. When, in their common past, when till this moment, had she shown a fear, however dumbly,

for his individual life? They had had fears together, just as they had had joys, but all of hers, at least, had been for what equally concerned them. Here of a sudden was a question that concerned him alone, and the soundless explosion of it somehow marked a date. He was on her mind, he was even in a manner on her hands — as a distinct thing, that is, from being, where he had always been, merely deep in her heart and in her life; too deep down, as it were, to be disengaged, contrasted or opposed, in short objectively presented. But time finally had done it; their relation was altered: he SAW, again, the difference lighted for her. This marked it to himself — and it wasn't a question simply of a Mrs. Rance the more or the less. For Maggie too, at a stroke, almost beneficently, their visitor had, from being an inconvenience, become a sign. They had made vacant, by their marriage, his immediate foreground, his personal precinct — they being the Princess and the Prince. They had made room in it for others — so others had become aware. He became aware himself, for that matter, during the minute Maggie stood there before speaking; and with the sense, moreover, of what he saw her see, he had the sense of what she saw HIM. This last, it may be added, would have been his intensest perception had there not, the next instant, been more for him in Fanny Assingham. Her face couldn't keep it from him; she had seen, on top of everything, in her quick way, what they both were seeing.

IX

So much mute communication was doubtless, all this time, marvellous, and we may confess to having perhaps read into the scene, prematurely, a critical character that took longer to develop. Yet the quiet hour of reunion enjoyed that afternoon by the father and the daughter did really little else than deal with the elements definitely presented to each in the vibration produced by the return of the church-goers. Nothing allusive, nothing at all insistent, passed between them either before or immediately after luncheon — except indeed so far as their failure soon again to meet might be itself an accident charged with reference. The hour or two after luncheon — and on Sundays with especial rigour, for one of the domestic reasons of which it belonged to Maggie quite multitudinously to take account — were habitually spent by the Princess with her little boy, in whose apartment she either frequently found her father already established or was sooner or later joined by him. His visit to his grandson, at some hour or other, held its place, in his day, against all interventions, and this without counting his grandson's visits to HIM, scarcely less ordered and timed, and the odd bits, as he called them, that they picked up together when they could — communions snatched, for the most part, on the terrace, in the gardens or the park, while the Principino, with much pomp and circumstance of perambulator, parasol, fine lace over-veiling and incorruptible female attendance, took the air. In the private apartments, which, occupying in the great house the larger part of a wing of their own, were not much more easily accessible than if the place had been a royal palace and the small child an heir-apparent — in the nursery of nurseries the talk, at these instituted times, was always so prevailingly with or about the master of the scene that other interests and other topics had fairly learned to avoid the slighting and inadequate notice there taken of them. They came in, at the best, but as involved in the little boy's future, his past, or his comprehensive present, never getting so much as a chance to plead their own merits or to complain of being neglected. Nothing perhaps, in truth, had done more than this united participation to confirm in the elder parties that sense of a life not only uninterrupted but more deeply associated, more largely combined, of which, on Adam Verver's behalf, we have made some mention. It was of course an old story and a familiar idea that a beautiful baby could take its place as a new link between a wife and a husband, but Maggie and her father had, with every ingenuity, converted the precious creature into a link between a mamma and a grandpapa. The Principino, for a chance spectator of this process, might have become, by an untoward stroke, a hapless half-orphan, with the place of immediate male parent swept bare and open to the next nearest sympathy.

They had no occasion thus, the conjoined worshippers, to talk of what the Prince might be or might do for his son — the sum of service, in his absence, so completely filled itself out. It was not in the least, moreover, that there was doubt of him, for he was conspicuously addicted to the manipulation of the child, in the frank Italian way, at such moments as he judged discreet in respect to other claims: conspicuously, indeed, that is, for Maggie, who had more occasion, on the whole, to speak to her husband of the extravagance of her father than to speak to her father of the extravagance of her husband. Adam Verver had, all round, in this connection, his own serenity. He was sure of his son-in-law's auxiliary admiration — admiration, he meant, of his grand-son; since, to begin with, what else had been at work but the instinct — or it might fairly have been the tradition — of the latter's making the child so solidly beautiful as to HAVE to be admired? What contributed most to harmony in this play of relations, however, was the way the young man seemed to leave it to be gathered that, tradition for tradition, the grandpapa's own was not, in any estimate, to go for nothing. A tradition, or whatever it was, that had flowered prelusively in the Princess herself — well, Amerigo's very discretions were his way of taking account of it. His discriminations in respect to his heir were, in fine, not more angular than any others to be observed in him; and Mr. Verver received perhaps from no source so distinct an impression of being for him an odd and important phenomenon as he received from this impunity of appropriation, these unchallenged nursery hours. It was as if the grandpapa's special show of the character were but another side for the observer to study, another item for him to note. It came back, this latter personage knew, to his own previous perception — that of the Prince's inability, in any matter in which he was concerned, to CONCLUDE. The idiosyncrasy, for him, at each stage, had to be demonstrated — on which, however, he admirably accepted it. This last was, after all, the point; he really worked, poor young man, for acceptance, since he worked so constantly for comprehension. And how, when you came to that, COULD you know that a horse wouldn't shy at a brass-band, in a country road, because it didn't shy at a traction-engine? It might have been brought up to traction-engines without having been brought up to brass-

bands. Little by little, thus, from month to month, the Prince was learning what his wife's father had been brought up to; and now it could be checked off — he had been brought, up to the romantic view of principini. Who would have thought it, and where would it all stop? The only fear somewhat sharp for Mr. Verver was a certain fear of disappointing him for strangeness. He felt that the evidence he offered, thus viewed, was too much on the positive side. He didn't know — he was learning, and it was funny for him — to how many things he HAD been brought up. If the Prince could only strike something to which he hadn't! This wouldn't, it seemed to him, ruffle the smoothness, and yet MIGHT, a little, add to the interest.

What was now clear, at all events, for the father and the daughter, was their simply knowing they wanted, for the time, to be together — at any cost, as it were; and their necessity so worked in them as to bear them out of the house, in a quarter hidden from that in which their friends were gathered, and cause them to wander, unseen, unfollowed, along a covered walk in the "old" garden, as it was called, old with an antiquity of formal things, high box and shaped yew and expanses of brick wall that had turned at once to purple and to pink. They went out of a door in the wall, a door that had a slab with a date set above it, 1713, but in the old multiplied lettering, and then had before them a small white gate, intensely white and clean amid all the greenness, through which they gradually passed to where some of the grandest trees spaciously clustered and where they would find one of the quietest places. A bench had been placed, long ago, beneath a great oak that helped to crown a mild eminence, and the ground sank away below it, to rise again, opposite, at a distance sufficient to enclose the solitude and figure a bosky horizon. Summer, blissfully, was with them yet, and the low sun made a splash of light where it pierced the looser shade; Maggie, coming down to go out, had brought a parasol, which, as, over her charming bare head, she now handled it, gave, with the big straw hat that her father in these days always wore a good deal tipped back, definite intention to their walk. They knew the bench; it was "sequestered" — they had praised it for that together, before, and liked the word; and after they had begun to linger there they could have smiled (if they hadn't been really too serious, and if the question hadn't so soon ceased to matter), over the probable wonder of the others as to what would have become of them.

The extent to which they enjoyed their indifference to any judgment of their want of ceremony, what did that of itself speak but for the way that, as a rule, they almost equally had others on their mind? They each knew that both were full of the superstition of not "hurting," but might precisely have been asking themselves, asking in fact each other, at this moment, whether that was to be, after all, the last word of their conscientious development. Certain it was, at all events, that, in addition to the Assinghams and the Lutches and Mrs. Rance, the attendance at tea, just in the right place on the west terrace, might perfectly comprise the four or five persons — among them the very pretty, the typically Irish Miss Maddock, vaunted, announced and now brought — from the couple of other houses near enough, one of these the minor residence Of their proprietor, established, thriftily, while he hired out his ancestral home, within sight and sense of his profit. It was not less certain, either, that, for once in a way, the group in question must all take the case as they found it. Fanny Assingham, at any time, for that matter, might perfectly be trusted to see Mr. Verver and his daughter, to see their reputation for a decent friendliness, through any momentary danger; might be trusted even to carry off their absence for Amerigo, for Amerigo's possible funny Italian anxiety; Amerigo always being, as the Princess was well aware, conveniently amenable to this friend's explanations, beguilements, reassurances, and perhaps in fact rather more than less dependent on them as his new life — since that was his own name for it — opened out. It was no secret to Maggie — it was indeed positively a public joke for her — that she couldn't explain as Mrs. Assingham did, and that, the Prince liking explanations, liking them almost as if he collected them, in the manner of book-plates or postage-stamps, for themselves, his requisition of this luxury had to be met. He didn't seem to want them as yet for use — rather for ornament and amusement, innocent amusement of the kind he most fancied and that was so characteristic of his blessed, beautiful, general, slightly indolent lack of more dissipated, or even just of more sophisticated, tastes.

However that might be, the dear woman had come to be frankly and gaily recognised — and not least by herself — as filling in the intimate little circle an office that was not always a sinecure. It was almost as if she had taken, with her kind, melancholy Colonel at her heels, a responsible engagement; to be within call, as it were, for all those appeals that sprang out of talk, that sprang not a little, doubtless too, out of leisure. It naturally led her position in the household, as, she called it, to considerable frequency of presence, to visits, from the good couple, freely repeated and prolonged, and not so much as under form of protest. She was there to keep him quiet — it was Amerigo's own description of her influence; and it would only have needed a

more visible disposition to unrest in him to make the account perfectly fit. Fanny herself limited indeed, she minimised, her office; you didn't need a jailor, she contended, for a domesticated lamb tied up with pink ribbon. This was not an animal to be controlled — it was an animal to be, at the most, educated. She admitted accordingly that she was educative — which Maggie was so aware that she herself, inevitably, wasn't; so it came round to being true that what she was most in charge of was his mere intelligence. This left, goodness knew, plenty of different calls for Maggie to meet — in a case in which so much pink ribbon, as it might be symbolically named, was lavished on the creature. What it all amounted to, at any rate, was that Mrs. Assingham would be keeping him quiet now, while his wife and his father-in-law carried out their own little frugal picnic; quite moreover, doubtless, not much less neededly in respect to the members of the circle that were with them there than in respect to the pair they were missing almost for the first time. It was present to Maggie that the Prince could bear, when he was with his wife, almost any queerness on the part of people, strange English types, who bored him, beyond convenience, by being so little as he himself was; for this was one of the ways in which a wife was practically sustaining. But she was as positively aware that she hadn't yet learned to see him as meeting such exposure in her absence. How did he move and talk, how above all did he, or how WOULD he, look — he who, with his so nobly handsome face, could look such wonderful things — in case of being left alone with some of the subjects of his wonder? There were subjects for wonder among these very neighbours; only Maggie herself had her own odd way — which didn't moreover the least irritate him — of really liking them in proportion as they could strike her as strange. It came out in her by heredity, he amused himself with declaring, this love of chinoiseries; but she actually this evening didn't mind — he might deal with her Chinese as he could.

Maggie indeed would always have had for such moments, had they oftener occurred, the impression made on her by a word of Mrs. Assingham's, a word referring precisely to that appetite in Amerigo for the explanatory which we have just found in our path. It wasn't that the Princess could be indebted to another person, even to so clever a one as this friend, for seeing anything in her husband that she mightn't see unaided; but she had ever, hitherto, been of a nature to accept with modest gratitude any better description of a felt truth than her little limits — terribly marked, she knew, in the direction of saying the right things — enabled her to make. Thus it was, at any rate, that she was able to live more or less in the light of the fact expressed so lucidly by their common comforter — the fact that the Prince was saving up, for some very mysterious but very fine eventual purpose, all the wisdom, all the answers to his questions, all the impressions and generalisations, he gathered; putting them away and packing them down because he wanted his great gun to be loaded to the brim on the day he should decide to let it off. He wanted first to make sure of the whole of the subject that was unrolling itself before him; after which the innumerable facts he had collected would find their use. He knew what he was about — trust him at last therefore to make, and to some effect, his big noise. And Mrs. Assingham had repeated that he knew what he was about. It was the happy form of this assurance that had remained with Maggie; it could always come in for her that Amerigo knew what he was about. He might at moments seem vague, seem absent, seem even bored: this when, away from her father, with whom it was impossible for him to appear anything but respectfully occupied, he let his native gaiety go in outbreaks of song, or even of quite whimsical senseless sound, either expressive of intimate relaxation or else fantastically plaintive. He might at times reflect with the frankest lucidity on the circumstance that the case was for a good while yet absolutely settled in regard to what he still had left, at home, of his very own; in regard to the main seat of his affection, the house in Rome, the big black palace, the Palazzo Nero, as he was fond of naming it, and also on the question of the villa in the Sabine hills, which she had, at the time of their engagement, seen and yearned over, and the Castello proper, described by him always as the "perched" place, that had, as she knew, formerly stood up, on the pedestal of its mountain-slope, showing beautifully blue from afar, as the head and front of the princedom. He might rejoice in certain moods over the so long-estranged state of these properties, not indeed all irreclaimably alienated, but encumbered with unending leases and charges, with obstinate occupants, with impossibilities of use — all without counting the cloud of mortgages that had, from far back, buried them beneath the ashes of rage and remorse, a shroud as thick as the layer once resting on the towns at the foot of Vesuvius, and actually making of any present restorative effort a process much akin to slow excavation. Just so he might with another turn of his humour almost wail for these brightest spots of his lost paradise, declaring that he was an idiot not to be able to bring himself to face the sacrifices — sacrifices resting, if definitely anywhere, with Mr. Verver — necessary for winning them back.

One of the most comfortable things between the husband and the wife meanwhile — one of those easy

certitudes they could be merely gay about — was that she never admired him so much, or so found him heartbreakingly handsome, clever, irresistible, in the very degree in which he had originally and fatally dawned upon her, as when she saw other women reduced to the same passive pulp that had then begun, once for all, to constitute HER substance. There was really nothing they had talked of together with more intimate and familiar pleasantry than of the license and privilege, the boundless happy margin, thus established for each: she going so far as to put it that, even should he some day get drunk and beat her, the spectacle of him with hated rivals would, after no matter what extremity, always, for the sovereign charm of it, charm of it in itself and as the exhibition of him that most deeply moved her, suffice to bring her round. What would therefore be more open to him than to keep her in love with him? He agreed, with all his heart, at these light moments, that his course wouldn't then be difficult, inasmuch as, so simply constituted as he was on all the precious question — and why should he be ashamed of it? — he knew but one way with the fair. They had to be fair — and he was fastidious and particular, his standard was high; but when once this was the case what relation with them was conceivable, what relation was decent, rudimentary, properly human, but that of a plain interest in the fairness? His interest, she always answered, happened not to be "plain," and plainness, all round, had little to do with the matter, which was marked, on the contrary, by the richest variety of colour; but the working basis, at all events, had been settled — the Miss Maddocks of life been assured of their importance for him. How conveniently assured Maggie — to take him too into the joke — had more than once gone so far as to mention to her father; since it fell in easily with the tenderness of her disposition to remember she might occasionally make him happy by an intimate confidence. This was one of her rules-full as she was of little rules, considerations, provisions. There were things she of course couldn't tell him, in so many words, about Amerigo and herself, and about their happiness and their union and their deepest depths — and there were other things she needn't; but there were also those that were both true and amusing, both communicable and real, and of these, with her so conscious, so delicately cultivated scheme of conduct as a daughter, she could make her profit at will. A pleasant hush, for that matter, had fallen on most of the elements while she lingered apart with her companion; it involved, this serenity, innumerable complete assumptions: since so ordered and so splendid a rest, all the tokens, spreading about them, of confidence solidly supported, might have suggested for persons of poorer pitch the very insolence of facility. Still, they weren't insolent — THEY weren't, our pair could reflect; they were only blissful and grateful and personally modest, not ashamed of knowing, with competence, when great things were great, when good things were good, and when safe things were safe, and not, therefore, placed below their fortune by timidity which would have been as bad as being below it by impudence. Worthy of it as they were, and as each appears, under our last possible analysis, to have wished to make the other feel that they were, what they most finally exhaled into the evening air as their eyes mildly met may well have been a kind of helplessness in their felicity. Their rightness, the justification of everything — something they so felt the pulse of — sat there with them; but they might have been asking themselves a little blankly to what further use they could put anything so perfect. They had created and nursed and established it; they had housed it here in dignity and crowned it with comfort; but mightn't the moment possibly count for them — or count at least for us while we watch them with their fate all before them — as the dawn of the discovery that it doesn't always meet ALL contingencies to be right? Otherwise why should Maggie have found a word of definite doubt — the expression of the fine pang determined in her a few hours before — rise after a time to her lips? She took so for granted moreover her companion's intelligence of her doubt that the mere vagueness of her question could say it all. "What is it, after all, that they want to do to you?" "They" were for the Princess too the hovering forces of which Mrs. Rance was the symbol, and her father, only smiling back now, at his ease, took no trouble to appear not to know what she meant. What she meant — when once she had spoken — could come out well enough; though indeed it was nothing, after they had come to the point, that could serve as ground for a great defensive campaign. The waters of talk spread a little, and Maggie presently contributed an idea in saying: "What has really happened is that the proportions, for us, are altered." He accepted equally, for the time, this somewhat cryptic remark; he still failed to challenge her even when she added that it wouldn't so much matter if he hadn't been so terribly young. He uttered a sound of protest only when she went to declare that she ought as a daughter, in common decency, to have waited. Yet by that time she was already herself admitting that she should have had to wait long — if she waited, that is, till he was old. But there was a way. "Since you ARE an irresistible youth, we've got to face it. That, somehow, is what that woman has made me feel. There'll be others."

X

To talk of it thus appeared at last a positive relief to him. “Yes, there’ll be others. But you’ll see me through.”

She hesitated. “Do you mean if you give in?”

“Oh no. Through my holding out.”

Maggie waited again, but when she spoke it had an effect of abruptness. “Why SHOULD you hold out forever?”

He gave, none the less, no start — and this as from the habit of taking anything, taking everything, from her as harmonious. But it was quite written upon him too, for that matter, that holding out wouldn’t be, so very completely, his natural, or at any rate his acquired, form. His appearance would have testified that he might have to do so a long time — for a man so greatly beset. This appearance, that is, spoke but little, as yet, of short remainders and simplified senses — and all in spite of his being a small, spare, slightly stale person, deprived of the general prerogative of presence. It was not by mass or weight or vulgar immediate quantity that he would in the future, any more than he had done in the past, insist or resist or prevail. There was even something in him that made his position, on any occasion, made his relation to any scene or to any group, a matter of the back of the stage, of an almost visibly conscious want of affinity with the footlights. He would have figured less than anything the stage-manager or the author of the play, who most occupy the foreground; he might be, at the best, the financial “backer,” watching his interests from the wing, but in rather confessed ignorance of the mysteries of mimicry. Barely taller than his daughter, he pressed at no point on the presumed propriety of his greater stoutness. He had lost early in life much of his crisp, closely-curling hair, the fineness of which was repeated in a small neat beard, too compact to be called “full,” though worn equally, as for a mark where other marks were wanting, on lip and cheek and chin. His neat, colourless face, provided with the merely indispensable features, suggested immediately, for a description, that it was CLEAR, and in this manner somewhat resembled a small decent room, clean-swept and unencumbered with furniture, but drawing a particular advantage, as might presently be noted, from the outlook of a pair of ample and uncurtained windows. There was something in Adam Verver’s eyes that both admitted the morning and the evening in unusual quantities and gave the modest area the outward extension of a view that was “big” even when restricted to stars. Deeply and changeably blue, though not romantically large, they were yet youthfully, almost strangely beautiful, with their ambiguity of your scarce knowing if they most carried their possessor’s vision out or most opened themselves to your own. Whatever you might feel, they stamped the place with their importance, as the house-agents say; so that, on one side or the other, you were never out of their range, were moving about, for possible community, opportunity, the sight of you scarce knew what, either before them or behind them. If other importances, not to extend the question, kept themselves down, they were in no direction less obtruded than in that of our friend’s dress, adopted once for all as with a sort of sumptuary scruple. He wore every day of the year, whatever the occasion, the same little black “cut away” coat, of the fashion of his younger time; he wore the same cool-looking trousers, chequered in black and white — the proper harmony with which, he inveterately considered, was a sprigged blue satin necktie; and, over his concave little stomach, quaintly indifferent to climates and seasons, a white duck waistcoat. “Should you really,” he now asked, “like me to marry?” He spoke as if, coming from his daughter herself, it MIGHT be an idea; which, for that matter, he would be ready to carry out should she definitely say so.

Definite, however, just yet, she was not prepared to be, though it seemed to come to her with force, as she thought, that there was a truth, in the connection, to utter. “What I feel is that there is somehow something that used to be right and that I’ve made wrong. It used to be right that you hadn’t married, and that you didn’t seem to want to. It used also” — she continued to make out “to seem easy for the question not to come up. That’s what I’ve made different. It does come up. It WILL come up.”

“You don’t think I can keep it down?” Mr. Verver’s tone was cheerfully pensive.

“Well, I’ve given you, by MY move, all the trouble of having to.”

He liked the tenderness of her idea, and it made him, as she sat near him, pass his arm about her. “I guess I don’t feel as if you had ‘moved’ very far. You’ve only moved next door.”

“Well,” she continued, “I don’t feel as if it were fair for me just to have given you a push and left you so. If I’ve made the difference for you, I must think of the difference.”

“Then what, darling,” he indulgently asked, “DO you think?”

"That's just what I don't yet know. But I must find out. We must think together — as we've always thought. What I mean," she went on after a moment, "is that it strikes me that I ought to at least offer you some alternative. I ought to have worked one out for you."

"An alternative to what?"

"Well, to your simply missing what you've lost — without anything being done about it."

"But what HAVE I lost?"

She thought a minute, as if it were difficult to say, yet as if she more and more saw it. "Well, whatever it was that, BEFORE, kept us from thinking, and kept you, really, as you might say, in the market. It was as if you couldn't be in the market when you were married to me. Or rather as if I kept people off, innocently, by being married to you. Now that I'm married to some one else you're, as in consequence, married to nobody. Therefore you may be married to anybody, to everybody. People don't see why you shouldn't be married to THEM."

"Isn't it enough of a reason," he mildly inquired, "that I don't want to be?"

"It's enough of a reason, yes. But to BE enough of a reason it has to be too much of a trouble. I mean FOR you. It has to be too much of a fight. You ask me what you've lost," Maggie continued to explain. "The not having to take the trouble and to make the fight — that's what you've lost. The advantage, the happiness of being just as you were — because I was just as *I* was — that's what you miss."

"So that you think," her father presently said, "that I had better get married just in order to be as I was before?"

The detached tone of it — detached as if innocently to amuse her by showing his desire to accommodate — was so far successful as to draw from her gravity a short, light laugh. "Well, what I don't want you to feel is that if you were to I shouldn't understand. I SHOULD understand. That's all," said the Princess gently.

Her companion turned it pleasantly over. "You don't go so far as to wish me to take somebody I don't like?"

"Ah, father," she sighed, "you know how far I go — how far I COULD go. But I only wish that if you ever SHOULD like anybody, you may never doubt of my feeling how I've brought you to it. You'll always know that I know that it's my fault."

"You mean," he went on in his contemplative way, "that it will be you who'll take the consequences?"

Maggie just considered. "I'll leave you all the good ones, but I'll take the bad."

"Well, that's handsome." He emphasised his sense of it by drawing her closer and holding her more tenderly. "It's about all I could expect of you. So far as you've wronged me, therefore, we'll call it square. I'll let you know in time if I see a prospect of your having to take it up. But am I to understand meanwhile," he soon went on, "that, ready as you are to see me through my collapse, you're not ready, or not AS ready, to see me through my resistance? I've got to be a regular martyr before you'll be inspired?"

She demurred at his way of putting it. "Why, if you like it, you know, it won't BE a collapse."

"Then why talk about seeing me through at all? I shall only collapse if I do like it. But what I seem to feel is that I don't WANT to like it. That is," he amended, "unless I feel surer I do than appears very probable. I don't want to have to THINK I like it in a case when I really shan't. I've had to do that in some cases," he confessed— "when it has been a question of other things. I don't want," he wound up, "to be MADE to make a mistake."

"Ah, but it's too dreadful," she returned, "that you should even have to FEAR — or just nervously to dream — that you may be. What does that show, after all," she asked, "but that you do really, well within, feel a want? What does it show but that you're truly susceptible?"

"Well, it may show that" — he defended himself against nothing. "But it shows also, I think, that charming women are, in the kind of life we're leading now, numerous and formidable."

Maggie entertained for a moment the proposition; under cover of which, however, she passed quickly from the general to the particular. "Do you feel Mrs. Rance to be charming?"

"Well, I feel her to be formidable. When they cast a spell it comes to the same thing. I think she'd do anything."

"Oh well, I'd help you," the Princess said with decision, "as against HER — if that's all you require. It's too funny," she went on before he again spoke, "that Mrs. Rance should be here at all. But if you talk of the life we lead, much of it is, altogether, I'm bound to say, too funny. The thing is," Maggie developed under this impression, "that I don't think we lead, as regards other people, any life at all. We don't at any rate, it

seems to me, lead half the life we might. And so it seems, I think, to Amerigo. So it seems also, I'm sure, to Fanny Assingham."

Mr. Verver-as if from due regard for these persons — considered a little. "What life would they like us to lead?"

"Oh, it's not a question, I think, on which they quite feel together. SHE thinks, dear Fanny, that we ought to be greater."

"Greater — ?" He echoed it vaguely. "And Amerigo too, you say?"

"Ah yes"-her reply was prompt "but Amerigo doesn't mind. He doesn't care, I mean, what we do. It's for us, he considers, to see things exactly as we wish. Fanny herself," Maggie pursued, "thinks he's magnificent. Magnificent, I mean, for taking everything as it is, for accepting the 'social limitations' of our life, for not missing what we don't give him."

Mr. Verver attended. "Then if he doesn't miss it his magnificence is easy."

"It IS easy-that's exactly what I think. If there were things he DID miss, and if in spite of them he were always sweet, then, no doubt, he would be a more or less unappreciated hero. He COULD be a Hero — he WILL be one if it's ever necessary. But it will be about something better than our dreariness. *I* know," the Princess declared, "where he's magnificent." And she rested a minute on that. She ended, however, as she had begun. "We're not, all the same, committed to anything stupid. If we ought to be grander, as Fanny thinks, we CAN be grander. There's nothing to prevent."

"Is it a strict moral obligation?" Adam Verver inquired.

"No — it's for the amusement."

"For whose? For Fanny's own?"

"For everyone's — though I dare say Fanny's would be a large part." She hesitated; she had now, it might have appeared, something more to bring out, which she finally produced. "For yours in particular, say — if you go into the question." She even bravely followed it up. "I haven't really, after all, had to think much to see that much more can be done for you than is done."

Mr. Verver uttered an odd vague sound. "Don't you think a good deal is done when you come out and talk to me this way?"

"Ah," said his daughter, smiling at him, "we make too much of that!" And then to explain: "That's good, and it's natural — but it isn't great. We forget that we're as free as air."

"Well, THAT'S great," Mr. Verver pleaded. "Great if we act on it. Not if we don't."

She continued to smile, and he took her smile; wondering again a little by this time, however; struck more and more by an intensity in it that belied a light tone. "What do you want," he demanded, "to do to me?" And he added, as she didn't say: "You've got something in your mind." It had come to him within the minute that from the beginning of their session there she had been keeping something back, and that an impression of this had more than once, in spite of his general theoretic respect for her present right to personal reserves and mysteries, almost ceased to be vague in him. There had been from the first something in her anxious eyes, in the way she occasionally lost herself, that it would perfectly explain. He was therefore now quite sure.

"You've got something up your sleeve."

She had a silence that made him right. "Well, when I tell you you'll understand. It's only up my sleeve in the sense of being in a letter I got this morning. All day, yes — it HAS been in my mind. I've been asking myself if it were quite the right moment, or in any way fair, to ask you if you could stand just now another woman."

It relieved him a little, yet the beautiful consideration of her manner made it in a degree portentous. "Stand one — ?"

"Well, mind her coming."

He stared — then he laughed. "It depends on who she is."

"There — you see! I've at all events been thinking whether you'd take this particular person but as a worry the more. Whether, that is, you'd go so far with her in your notion of having to be kind."

He gave at this the quickest shake to his foot. How far would she go in HER notion of it.

"Well," his daughter returned, "you know how far, in a general way, Charlotte Stant goes."

"Charlotte? Is SHE coming?"

"She writes me, practically, that she'd like to if we're so good as to ask her."

Mr. Verver continued to gaze, but rather as if waiting for more. Then, as everything appeared to have

come, his expression had a drop. If this was all it was simple. “Then why in the world not?”

Maggie’s face lighted anew, but it was now another light. “It isn’t a want of tact?”

“To ask her?”

“To propose it to you.”

“That *I* should ask her?”

He put the question as an effect of his remnant of vagueness, but this had also its own effect. Maggie wondered an instant; after which, as with a flush of recognition, she took it up. “It would be too beautiful if you WOULD!”

This, clearly, had not been her first idea — the chance of his words had prompted it. “Do you mean write to her myself?”

“Yes — it would be kind. It would be quite beautiful of you. That is, of course,” said Maggie, “if you sincerely CAN.”

He appeared to wonder an instant why he sincerely shouldn’t, and indeed, for that matter, where the question of sincerity came in. This virtue, between him and his daughter’s friend, had surely been taken for granted. “My dear child,” he returned, “I don’t think I’m afraid of Charlotte.”

“Well, that’s just what it’s lovely to have from you. From the moment you’re NOT — the least little bit — I’ll immediately invite her.”

“But where in the world is she?” He spoke as if he had not thought of Charlotte, nor so much as heard her name pronounced, for a very long time. He quite in fact amicably, almost amusedly, woke up to her.

“She’s in Brittany, at a little bathing-place, with some people I don’t know. She’s always with people, poor dear — she rather has to be; even when, as is sometimes the case; they’re people she doesn’t immensely like.”

“Well, I guess she likes US,” said Adam Verver. “Yes — fortunately she likes us. And if I wasn’t afraid of spoiling it for you,” Maggie added, “I’d even mention that you’re not the one of our number she likes least.”

“Why should that spoil it for me?”

“Oh, my dear, you know. What else have we been talking about? It costs you so much to be liked. That’s why I hesitated to tell you of my letter.”

He stared a moment — as if the subject had suddenly grown out of recognition. “But Charlotte — on other visits — never used to cost me anything.”

“No — only her ‘keep,’” Maggie smiled.

“Then I don’t think I mind her keep — if that’s all.” The Princess, however, it was clear, wished to be thoroughly conscientious. “Well, it may not be quite all. If I think of its being pleasant to have her, it’s because she WILL make a difference.”

“Well, what’s the harm in that if it’s but a difference for the better?”

“Ah then — there you are!” And the Princess showed in her smile her small triumphant wisdom. “If you acknowledge a possible difference for the better we’re not, after all, so tremendously right as we are. I mean we’re not — as satisfied and amused. We do see there are ways of being grander.”

“But will Charlotte Stant,” her father asked with surprise, “make us grander?”

Maggie, on this, looking at him well, had a remarkable reply. “Yes, I think. Really grander.”

He thought; for if this was a sudden opening he wished but the more to meet it. “Because she’s so handsome?”

“No, father.” And the Princess was almost solemn. “Because she’s so great.”

“Great — ?”

“Great in nature, in character, in spirit. Great in life.”

“So?” Mr. Verver echoed. “What has she done — in life?”

“Well, she has been brave and bright,” said Maggie. “That mayn’t sound like much, but she has been so in the face of things that might well have made it too difficult for many other girls. She hasn’t a creature in the world really — that is nearly — belonging to her. Only acquaintances who, in all sorts of ways, make use of her, and distant relations who are so afraid she’ll make use of THEM that they seldom let her look at them.”

Mr. Verver was struck — and, as usual, to some purpose. “If we get her here to improve us don’t we too then make use of her?”

It pulled the Princess up, however, but an instant. “We’re old, old friends — we do her good too. I should always, even at the worst — speaking for myself — admire her still more than I used her.”

"I see. That always does good."

Maggie hesitated. "Certainly — she knows it. She knows, I mean, how great I think her courage and her cleverness. She's not afraid — not of anything; and yet she no more ever takes a liberty with you than if she trembled for her life. And then she's INTERESTING — which plenty of other people with plenty of other merits never are a bit." In which fine flicker of vision the truth widened to the Princess's view. "I myself of course don't take liberties, but then I do, always, by nature, tremble for my life. That's the way I live."

"Oh I say, love!" her father vaguely murmured.

"Yes, I live in terror," she insisted. "I'm a small creeping thing."

"You'll not persuade me that you're not as good as Charlotte Stant," he still placidly enough remarked.

"I may be as good, but I'm not so great — and that's what we're talking about. She has a great imagination. She has, in every way, a great attitude. She has above all a great conscience." More perhaps than ever in her life before Maggie addressed her father at this moment with a shade of the absolute in her tone. She had never come so near telling him what he should take it from her to believe. "She has only twopence in the world — but that has nothing to do with it. Or rather indeed" — she quickly corrected herself— "it has everything. For she doesn't care. I never saw her do anything but laugh at her poverty. Her life has been harder than anyone knows."

It was moreover as if, thus unprecedentedly positive, his child had an effect upon him that Mr. Verver really felt as a new thing. "Why then haven't you told me about her before?"

"Well, haven't we always known — ?"

"I should have thought," he submitted, "that we had already pretty well sized her up."

"Certainly — we long ago quite took her for granted. But things change, with time, and I seem to know that, after this interval, I'm going to like her better than ever. I've lived more myself, I'm older, and one judges better. Yes, I'm going to see in Charlotte," said the Princess — and speaking now as with high and free expectation— "more than I've ever seen."

"Then I'll try to do so too. She WAS" — it came back to Mr. Verver more— "the one of your friends I thought the best for you."

His companion, however, was so launched in her permitted liberty of appreciation that she for the moment scarce heard him. She was lost in the case she made out, the vision of the different ways in which Charlotte had distinguished herself.

"She would have liked for instance — I'm sure she would have liked extremely — to marry; and nothing in general is more ridiculous, even when it has been pathetic, than a woman who has tried and has not been able."

It had all Mr. Verver's attention. "She has 'tried' — ?"

"She has seen cases where she would have liked to."

"But she has not been able?"

"Well, there are more cases, in Europe, in which it doesn't come to girls who are poor than in which it does come to them. Especially," said Maggie with her continued competence, "when they're Americans."

Well, her father now met her, and met her cheerfully, on all sides. "Unless you mean," he suggested, "that when the girls are American there are more cases in which it comes to the rich than to the poor."

She looked at him good-humouredly. "That may be — but I'm not going to be smothered in MY case. It ought to make me — if I were in danger of being a fool — all the nicer to people like Charlotte. It's not hard for ME," she practically explained, "not to be ridiculous — unless in a very different way. I might easily be ridiculous, I suppose, by behaving as if I thought I had done a great thing. Charlotte, at any rate, has done nothing, and anyone can see it, and see also that it's rather strange; and yet no one — no one not awfully presumptuous or offensive would like, or would dare, to treat her, just as she is, as anything but quite RIGHT. That's what it is to have something about you that carries things off."

Mr. Verver's silence, on this, could only be a sign that she had caused her story to interest him; though the sign when he spoke was perhaps even sharper. "And is it also what you mean by Charlotte's being 'great'?"

"Well," said Maggie, "it's one of her ways. But she has many."

Again for a little her father considered. "And who is it she has tried to marry?"

Maggie, on her side as well, waited as if to bring it out with effect; but she after a minute either renounced or encountered an obstacle. "I'm afraid I'm not sure."

"Then how do you know?"

"Well, I don't KNOW" — and, qualifying again, she was earnestly emphatic. "I only make it out for myself."

"But you must make it out about someone in particular."

She had another pause. "I don't think I want even for myself to put names and times, to pull away any veil. I've an idea there has been, more than once, somebody I'm not acquainted with — and needn't be or want to be. In any case it's all over, and, beyond giving her credit for everything, it's none of my business."

Mr. Verver deferred, yet he discriminated. "I don't see how you can give credit without knowing the facts."

"Can't I give it — generally — for dignity? Dignity, I mean, in misfortune."

"You've got to postulate the misfortune first."

"Well," said Maggie, "I can do that. Isn't it always a misfortune to be — when you're so fine — so wasted? And yet," she went on, "not to wail about it, not to look even as if you knew it?"

Mr. Verver seemed at first to face this as a large question, and then, after a little, solicited by another view, to let the appeal drop. "Well, she mustn't be wasted. We won't at least have waste."

It produced in Maggie's face another gratitude. "Then, dear sir, that's all I want."

And it would apparently have settled their question and ended their talk if her father had not, after a little, shown the disposition to revert. "How many times are you supposing that she has tried?"

Once more, at this, and as if she hadn't been, couldn't be, hated to be, in such delicate matters, literal, she was moved to attenuate. "Oh, I don't say she absolutely ever TRIED — !"

He looked perplexed. "But if she has so absolutely failed, what then had she done?"

"She has suffered — she has done that." And the Princess added: "She has loved — and she has lost."

Mr. Verver, however, still wondered. "But how many times."

Maggie hesitated, but it cleared up. "Once is enough. Enough, that is, for one to be kind to her."

Her father listened, yet not challenging — only as with a need of some basis on which, under these new lights, his bounty could be firm. "But has she told you nothing?"

"Ah, thank goodness, no!"

He stared. "Then don't young women tell?"

"Because, you mean, it's just what they're supposed to do?" She looked at him, flushed again now; with which, after another hesitation, "Do young men tell?" she asked.

He gave a short laugh. "How do I know, my dear, what young men do?"

"Then how do *I* know, father, what vulgar girls do?"

"I see — I see," he quickly returned.

But she spoke the next moment as if she might, odiously, have been sharp. "What happens at least is that where there's a great deal of pride there's a great deal of silence. I don't know, I admit, what *I* should do if I were lonely and sore — for what sorrow, to speak of, have I ever had in my life? I don't know even if I'm proud — it seems to me the question has never come up for me."

"Oh, I guess you're proud, Mag," her father cheerfully interposed. "I mean I guess you're proud enough."

"Well then, I hope I'm humble enough too. I might, at all events, for all I know, be abject under a blow. How can I tell? Do you realise, father, that I've never had the least blow?"

He gave her a long, quiet look. "Who SHOULD realise if I don't?"

"Well, you'll realise when I HAVE one!" she exclaimed with a short laugh that resembled, as for good reasons, his own of a minute before. "I wouldn't in any case have let her tell me what would have been dreadful to me. For such wounds and shames are dreadful: at least," she added, catching herself up, "I suppose they are; for what, as I say, do I know of them? I don't WANT to know!" — she spoke quite with vehemence. "There are things that are sacred whether they're joys or pains. But one can always, for safety, be kind," she kept on; "one feels when that's right."

She had got up with these last words; she stood there before him with that particular suggestion in her aspect to which even the long habit of their life together had not closed his sense, kept sharp, year after year, by the collation of types and signs, the comparison of fine object with fine object, of one degree of finish, of one form of the exquisite with another — the appearance of some slight, slim draped "antique" of Vatican or Capitoline halls, late and refined, rare as a note and immortal as a link, set in motion by the miraculous infusion of a modern impulse and yet, for all the sudden freedom of folds and footsteps forsaken after centuries by their pedestal, keeping still the quality, the perfect felicity, of the statue; the blurred, absent eyes,

the smoothed, elegant, nameless head, the impersonal flit of a creature lost in an alien age and passing as an image in worn relief round and round a precious vase. She had always had odd moments of striking him, daughter of his very own though she was, as a figure thus simplified, "generalised" in its grace, a figure with which his human connection was fairly interrupted by some vague analogy of turn and attitude, something shyly mythological and nymphlike. The trick, he was not uncomplacently aware, was mainly of his own mind; it came from his caring for precious vases only less than for precious daughters. And what was more to the point still, it often operated while he was quite at the same time conscious that Maggie had been described, even in her prettiness, as "prim" — Mrs. Rance herself had enthusiastically used the word of her; while he remembered that when once she had been told before him, familiarly, that she resembled a nun, she had replied that she was delighted to hear it and would certainly try to; while also, finally, it was present to him that, discreetly heedless, thanks to her long association with nobleness in art, to the leaps and bounds of fashion, she brought her hair down very straight and flat over her temples, in the constant manner of her mother, who had not been a bit mythological. Nymphs and nuns were certainly separate types, but Mr. Verver, when he really amused himself, let consistency go. The play of vision was at all events so rooted in him that he could receive impressions of sense even while positively thinking. He was positively thinking while Maggie stood there, and it led for him to yet another question — which in its turn led to others still. "Do you regard the condition as hers then that you spoke of a minute ago?"

"The condition — ?"

"Why that of having loved so intensely that she's, as you say, 'beyond everything'?"

Maggie had scarcely to reflect — her answer was so prompt. "Oh no. She's beyond nothing. For she has had nothing."

"I see. You must have had things to be them. It's a kind of law of perspective."

Maggie didn't know about the law, but she continued definite. "She's not, for example, beyond help."

"Oh well then, she shall have all we can give her. I'll write to her," he said, "with pleasure."

"Angel!" she answered as she gaily and tenderly looked at him.

True as this might be, however, there was one thing more — he was an angel with a human curiosity. "Has she told you she likes me much?"

"Certainly she has told me — but I won't pamper you. Let it be enough for you it has always been one of my reasons for liking HER."

"Then she's indeed not beyond everything," Mr. Verver more or less humorously observed.

"Oh it isn't, thank goodness, that she's in love with you. It's not, as I told you at first, the sort of thing for you to fear."

He had spoken with cheer, but it appeared to drop before this reassurance, as if the latter overdid his alarm, and that should be corrected. "Oh, my dear, I've always thought of her as a little girl."

"Ah, she's not a little girl," said the Princess.

"Then I'll write to her as a brilliant woman."

"It's exactly what she is."

Mr. Verver had got up as he spoke, and for a little, before retracing their steps, they stood looking at each other as if they had really arranged something. They had come out together for themselves, but it had produced something more. What it had produced was in fact expressed by the words with which he met his companion's last emphasis. "Well, she has a famous friend in you, Princess."

Maggie took this in — it was too plain for a protest. "Do you know what I'm really thinking of?" she asked.

He wondered, with her eyes on him — eyes of contentment at her freedom now to talk; and he wasn't such a fool, he presently showed, as not, suddenly, to arrive at it. "Why, of your finding her at last yourself a husband."

"Good for YOU!" Maggie smiled. "But it will take," she added, "some looking."

"Then let me look right here with you," her father said as they walked on.

XI

Mrs. Assingham and the Colonel, quitting Fawns before the end of September, had come back later on; and now, a couple of weeks after, they were again interrupting their stay, but this time with the question of their return left to depend, on matters that were rather hinted at than importunately named. The Lutches and Mrs. Rance had also, by the action of Charlotte Stant's arrival, ceased to linger, though with hopes and theories, as to some promptitude of renewal, of which the lively expression, awakening the echoes of the great stone-paved, oak-panelled, galleried hall that was not the least interesting feature of the place, seemed still a property of the air. It was on this admirable spot that, before her October afternoon had waned, Fanny Assingham spent with her easy host a few moments which led to her announcing her own and her husband's final secession, at the same time as they tempted her to point the moral of all vain reverberations. The double door of the house stood open to an effect of hazy autumn sunshine, a wonderful, windless, waiting, golden hour, under the influence of which Adam Verver met his genial friend as she came to drop into the post-box with her own hand a thick sheaf of letters. They presently thereafter left the house together and drew out half-an-hour on the terrace in a manner they were to revert to in thought, later on, as that of persons who really had been taking leave of each other at a parting of the ways. He traced his impression, on coming to consider, back to a mere three words she had begun by using about Charlotte Stant. She simply "cleared them out" — those had been the three words, thrown off in reference to the general golden peace that the Kentish October had gradually ushered in, the "halcyon" days the full beauty of which had appeared to shine out for them after Charlotte's arrival. For it was during these days that Mrs. Rance and the Miss Lutches had been observed to be gathering themselves for departure, and it was with that difference made that the sense of the whole situation showed most fair — the sense of how right they had been to engage for so ample a residence, and of all the pleasure so fruity an autumn there could hold in its lap. This was what had occurred, that their lesson had been learned; and what Mrs. Assingham had dwelt upon was that without Charlotte it would have been learned but half. It would certainly not have been taught by Mrs. Rance and the Miss Lutches if these ladies had remained with them as long as at one time seemed probable. Charlotte's light intervention had thus become a cause, operating covertly but none the less actively, and Fanny Assingham's speech, which she had followed up a little, echoed within him, fairly to startle him, as the indication of something irresistible. He could see now how this superior force had worked, and he fairly liked to recover the sight — little harm as he dreamed of doing, little ill as he dreamed of wishing, the three ladies, whom he had after all entertained for a stiffish series of days. She had been so vague and quiet about it, wonderful Charlotte, that he hadn't known what was happening — happening, that is, as a result of her influence. "Their fires, as they felt her, turned to smoke," Mrs. Assingham remarked; which he was to reflect on indeed even while they strolled. He had retained, since his long talk with Maggie — the talk that had settled the matter of his own direct invitation to her friend — an odd little taste, as he would have described it, for hearing things said about this young woman, hearing, so to speak, what COULD be said about her: almost as it her portrait, by some eminent hand, were going on, so that he watched it grow under the multiplication of touches. Mrs. Assingham, it struck him, applied two or three of the finest in their discussion of their young friend — so different a figure now from that early playmate of Maggie's as to whom he could almost recall from of old the definite occasions of his having paternally lumped the two children together in the recommendation that they shouldn't make too much noise nor eat too much jam. His companion professed that in the light of Charlotte's prompt influence she had not been a stranger to a pang of pity for their recent visitors. "I felt in fact, privately, so sorry for them, that I kept my impression to myself while they were here — wishing not to put the rest of you on the scent; neither Maggie, nor the Prince, nor yourself, nor even Charlotte HERself, if you didn't happen to notice. Since you didn't, apparently, I perhaps now strike you as extravagant. But I'm not — I followed it all. One SAW the consciousness I speak of come over the poor things, very much as I suppose people at the court of the Borgias may have watched each other begin to look queer after having had the honour of taking wine with the heads of the family. My comparison's only a little awkward, for I don't in the least mean that Charlotte was consciously dropping poison into their cup. She was just herself their poison, in the sense of mortally disagreeing with them — but she didn't know it."

"Ah, she didn't know it?" Mr. Verver had asked with interest.

"Well, I THINK she didn't" — Mrs. Assingham had to admit that she hadn't pressingly sounded her. "I

don't pretend to be sure, in every connection, of what Charlotte knows. She doesn't, certainly, like to make people suffer — not, in general, as is the case with so many of us, even other women: she likes much rather to put them at their ease with her. She likes, that is — as all pleasant people do — to be liked."

"Ah, she likes to be liked?" her companion had gone on.

"She did, at the same time, no doubt, want to help us — to put us at our ease. That is she wanted to put you — and to put Maggie about you. So far as that went she had a plan. But it was only AFTER — it was not before, I really believe — that she saw how effectively she could work."

Again, as Mr. Verver felt, he must have taken it up. "Ah, she wanted to help us? — wanted to help ME?"

"Why," Mrs. Assingham asked after an instant, "should it surprise you?"

He just thought. "Oh, it doesn't!"

"She saw, of course, as soon as she came, with her quickness, where we all were. She didn't need each of us to go, by appointment, to her room at night, or take her out into the fields, for our palpitating tale. No doubt even she was rather impatient."

"OF the poor things?" Mr. Verver had here inquired while he waited.

"Well, of your not yourselves being so — and of YOUR not in particular. I haven't the least doubt in the world, par exemple, that she thinks you too meek."

"Oh, she thinks me too meek?"

"And she had been sent for, on the very face of it, to work right in. All she had to do, after all, was to be nice to you."

"To — a — ME?" said Adam Verver.

He could remember now that his friend had positively had a laugh for his tone. "To you and to every one. She had only to be what she is — and to be it all round. If she's charming, how can she help it? So it was, and so only, that she 'acted'-as the Borgia wine used to act. One saw it come over them — the extent to which, in her particular way, a woman, a woman other, and SO other, than themselves, COULD be charming. One saw them understand and exchange looks, then one saw them lose heart and decide to move. For what they had to take home was that it's she who's the real thing."

"Ah, it's she who's the real thing?" As HE had not hitherto taken it home as completely as the Miss Lutches and Mrs. Rance, so, doubtless, he had now, a little, appeared to offer submission in his appeal. "I see, I see" — he could at least simply take it home now; yet as not without wanting, at the same time, to be sure of what the real thing was. "And what would it be — a — definitely that you understand by that?"

She had only for an instant not found it easy to say. "Why, exactly what those women themselves want to be, and what her effect on them is to make them recognise that they never will."

"Oh — of course never?"

It not only remained and abode with them, it positively developed and deepened, after this talk, that the luxurious side of his personal existence was now again furnished, socially speaking, with the thing classed and stamped as "real" — just as he had been able to think of it as not otherwise enriched in consequence of his daughter's marriage. The note of reality, in so much projected light, continued to have for him the charm and the importance of which the maximum had occasionally been reached in his great "finds" — continued, beyond any other, to keep him attentive and gratified. Nothing perhaps might affect us as queerer, had we time to look into it, than this application of the same measure of value to such different pieces of property as old Persian carpets, say, and new human acquisitions; all the more indeed that the amiable man was not without an inkling, on his own side, that he was, as a taster of life, economically constructed. He put into his one little glass everything he raised to his lips, and it was as if he had always carried in his pocket, like a tool of his trade, this receptacle, a little glass cut with a fineness of which the art had long since been lost, and kept in an old morocco case stamped in uneffaceable gilt with the arms of a deposed dynasty. As it had served him to satisfy himself, so to speak, both about Amerigo and about the Bernadino Luini he had happened to come to knowledge of at the time he was consenting to the announcement of his daughter's betrothal, so it served him at present to satisfy himself about Charlotte Stant and an extraordinary set of oriental tiles of which he had lately got wind, to which a provoking legend was attached, and as to which he had made out, contentedly, that further news was to be obtained from a certain Mr. Gutermann-Seuss of Brighton. It was all, at bottom, in him, the aesthetic principle, planted where it could burn with a cold, still flame; where it fed almost wholly on the material directly involved, on the idea (followed by appropriation) of plastic beauty, of the thing visibly perfect in its kind; where, in short, in spite of the general tendency of the "devouring element" to spread, the

rest of his spiritual furniture, modest, scattered, and tended with unconscious care, escaped the consumption that in so many cases proceeds from the undue keeping-up of profane altar-fires. Adam Verver had in other words learnt the lesson of the senses, to the end of his own little book, without having, for a day, raised the smallest scandal in his economy at large; being in this particular not unlike those fortunate bachelors, or other gentlemen of pleasure, who so manage their entertainment of compromising company that even the austerest housekeeper, occupied and competent below-stairs, never feels obliged to give warning.

That figure has, however, a freedom that the occasion doubtless scarce demands, though we may retain it for its rough negative value. It was to come to pass, by a pressure applied to the situation wholly from within, that before the first ten days of November had elapsed he found himself practically alone at Fawns with his young friend; Amerigo and Maggie having, with a certain abruptness, invited his assent to their going abroad for a month, since his amusement was now scarce less happily assured than his security. An impulse eminently natural had stirred within the Prince; his life, as for some time established, was deliciously dull, and thereby, on the whole, what he best liked; but a small gust of yearning had swept over him, and Maggie repeated to her father, with infinite admiration, the pretty terms in which, after it had lasted a little, he had described to her this experience. He called it a "serenade," a low music that, outside one of the windows of the sleeping house, disturbed his rest at night. Timid as it was, and plaintive, he yet couldn't close his eyes for it, and when finally, rising on tiptoe, he had looked out, he had recognised in the figure below with a mandolin, all duskily draped in her grace, the raised appealing eyes and the one irresistible voice of the ever-to-be-loved Italy. Sooner or later, that way, one had to listen; it was a hovering, haunting ghost, as of a creature to whom one had done a wrong, a dim, pathetic shade crying out to be comforted. For this there was obviously but one way — as there were doubtless also many words for the simple fact that so prime a Roman had a fancy for again seeing Rome. They would accordingly — hadn't they better? — go for a little; Maggie meanwhile making the too-absurdly artful point with her father, so that he repeated it, in his amusement, to Charlotte Stant, to whom he was by this time conscious of addressing many remarks, that it was absolutely, when she came to think, the first thing Amerigo had ever asked of her. "She doesn't count of course his having asked of her to marry him" — this was Mr. Verver's indulgent criticism; but he found Charlotte, equally touched by the ingenuous Maggie, in easy agreement with him over the question. If the Prince had asked something of his wife every day in the year, this would be still no reason why the poor dear man should not, in a beautiful fit of homesickness, revisit, without reproach, his native country.

What his father-in-law frankly counselled was that the reasonable, the really too reasonable, pair should, while they were about it, take three or four weeks of Paris as well — Paris being always, for Mr. Verver, in any stress of sympathy, a suggestion that rose of itself to the lips. If they would only do that, on their way back, or however they preferred it, Charlotte and he would go over to join them there for a small look — though even then, assuredly, as he had it at heart to add, not in the least because they should have found themselves bored at being left together. The fate of this last proposal indeed was that it reeled, for the moment, under an assault of destructive analysis from Maggie, who — having, as she granted, to choose between being an unnatural daughter or an unnatural mother, and "electing" for the former — wanted to know what would become of the Principino if the house were cleared of everyone but the servants. Her question had fairly resounded, but it had afterwards, like many of her questions, dropped still more effectively than it had risen: the highest moral of the matter being, before the couple took their departure, that Mrs. Noble and Dr. Brady must mount unchallenged guard over the august little crib. If she hadn't supremely believed in the majestic value of the nurse, whose experience was in itself the amplest of pillows, just as her attention was a spreading canopy from which precedent and reminiscence dropped as thickly as parted curtains — if she hadn't been able to rest in this confidence she would fairly have sent her husband on his journey without her. In the same manner, if the sweetest — for it was so she qualified him — of little country doctors hadn't proved to her his wisdom by rendering irresistible, especially on rainy days and in direct proportion to the frequency of his calls, adapted to all weathers, that she should converse with him for hours over causes and consequences, over what he had found to answer with his little five at home, she would have drawn scant support from the presence of a mere grandfather and a mere brilliant friend. These persons, accordingly, her own predominance having thus, for the time, given way, could carry with a certain ease, and above all with mutual aid, their consciousness of a charge. So far as their office weighed they could help each other with it — which was in fact to become, as Mrs. Noble herself loomed larger for them, not a little of a relief and a diversion.

Mr. Verver met his young friend, at certain hours, in the day-nursery, very much as he had regularly met the child's fond mother — Charlotte having, as she clearly considered, given Maggie equal pledges and desiring never to fail of the last word for the daily letter she had promised to write. She wrote with high fidelity, she let her companion know, and the effect of it was, remarkably enough, that he himself didn't write. The reason of this was partly that Charlotte "told all about him" — which she also let him know she did — and partly that he enjoyed feeling, as a consequence, that he was generally, quite systematically, eased and, as they said, "done" for. Committed, as it were, to this charming and clever young woman, who, by becoming for him a domestic resource, had become for him practically a new person — and committed, especially, in his own house, which somehow made his sense of it a deeper thing — he took an interest in seeing how far the connection could carry him, could perhaps even lead him, and in thus putting to the test, for pleasant verification, what Fanny Assingham had said, at the last, about the difference such a girl could make. She was really making one now, in their simplified existence, and a very considerable one, though there was no one to compare her with, as there had been, so usefully, for Fanny — no Mrs. Rance, no Kitty, no Dotty Lutch, to help her to be felt, according to Fanny's diagnosis, as real. She was real, decidedly, from other causes, and Mr. Verver grew in time even a little amused at the amount of machinery Mrs. Assingham had seemed to see needed for pointing it. She was directly and immediately real, real on a pleasantly reduced and intimate scale, and at no moments more so than during those — at which we have just glanced — when Mrs. Noble made them both together feel that she, she alone, in the absence of the queen-mother, was regent of the realm and governess of the heir. Treated on such occasions as at best a pair of dangling and merely nominal court-functionaries, picturesque hereditary triflers entitled to the petites entrees but quite external to the State, which began and ended with the Nursery, they could only retire, in quickened sociability, to what was left them of the Palace, there to digest their gilded insignificance and cultivate, in regard to the true Executive, such snuff-taking ironies as might belong to rococo chamberlains moving among china lap-dogs.

Every evening, after dinner, Charlotte Stant played to him; seated at the piano and requiring no music, she went through his "favourite things" — and he had many favourites — with a facility that never failed, or that failed but just enough to pick itself up at a touch from his fitful voice. She could play anything, she could play everything — always shockingly, she of course insisted, but always, by his own vague measure, very much as if she might, slim, sinuous and strong, and with practised passion, have been playing lawn-tennis or endlessly and rhythmically waltzing. His love of music, unlike his other loves, owned to vaguenesses, but while, on his comparatively shaded sofa, and smoking, smoking, always smoking, in the great Fawns drawing-room as everywhere, the cigars of his youth, rank with associations — while, I say, he so listened to Charlotte's piano, where the score was ever absent but, between the lighted candles, the picture distinct, the vagueness spread itself about him like some boundless carpet, a surface delightfully soft to the pressure of his interest. It was a manner of passing the time that rather replaced conversation, but the air, at the end, none the less, before they separated, had a way of seeming full of the echoes of talk. They separated, in the hushed house, not quite easily, yet not quite awkwardly either, with tapers that twinkled in the large dark spaces, and for the most part so late that the last solemn servant had been dismissed for the night.

Late as it was on a particular evening toward the end of October, there had been a full word or two dropped into the still-stirring sea of other voices — a word or two that affected our friend even at the moment, and rather oddly, as louder and rounder than any previous sound; and then he had lingered, under pretext of an opened window to be made secure, after taking leave of his companion in the hall and watching her glimmer away up the staircase. He had for himself another impulse than to go to bed; picking up a hat in the hall, slipping his arms into a sleeveless cape and lighting still another cigar, he turned out upon the terrace through one of the long drawing-room windows and moved to and fro there for an hour beneath the sharp autumn stars. It was where he had walked in the afternoon sun with Fanny Assingham, and the sense of that other hour, the sense of the suggestive woman herself, was before him again as, in spite of all the previous degustation we have hinted at, it had not yet been. He thought, in a loose, an almost agitated order, of many things; the power that was in them to agitate having been part of his conviction that he should not soon sleep. He truly felt for a while that he should never sleep again till something had come to him; some light, some idea, some mere happy word perhaps, that he had begun to want, but had been till now, and especially the last day or two, vainly groping for. "Can you really then come if we start early?" — that was practically all he had said to the girl as she took up her bedroom light. And "Why in the world not, when I've nothing else to do, and should, besides, so immensely like it?" — this had as definitely been, on her side, the limit of the little

scene. There had in fact been nothing to call a scene, even of the littlest, at all — though he perhaps didn't quite know why something like the menace of one hadn't proceeded from her stopping half-way upstairs to turn and say, as she looked down on him, that she promised to content herself, for their journey, with a toothbrush and a sponge. There hovered about him, at all events, while he walked, appearances already familiar, as well as two or three that were new, and not the least vivid of the former connected itself with that sense of being treated with consideration which had become for him, as we have noted, one of the minor yet so far as there were any such, quite one of the compensatory, incidents of being a father-in-law. It had struck him, up to now, that this particular balm was a mixture of which Amerigo, as through some hereditary privilege, alone possessed the secret; so that he found himself wondering if it had come to Charlotte, who had unmistakably acquired it, through the young man's having amiably passed it on. She made use, for her so quietly grateful host, however this might be, of quite the same shades of attention and recognition, was mistress in an equal degree of the regulated, the developed art of placing him high in the scale of importance. That was even for his own thought a clumsy way of expressing the element of similarity in the agreeable effect they each produced on him, and it held him for a little only because this coincidence in their felicity caused him vaguely to connect or associate them in the matter of tradition, training, tact, or whatever else one might call it. It might almost have been — if such a link between them was to be imagined — that Amerigo had, a little, "coached" or incited their young friend, or perhaps rather that she had simply, as one of the signs of the general perfection Fanny Assingham commended in her, profited by observing, during her short opportunity before the start of the travellers, the pleasant application by the Prince of his personal system. He might wonder what exactly it was that they so resembled each other in treating him like — from what noble and propagated convention, in cases in which the exquisite "importance" was to be neither too grossly attributed nor too grossly denied, they had taken their specific lesson; but the difficulty was here of course that one could really never know — couldn't know without having been one's self a personage; whether a Pope, a King, a President, a Peer, a General, or just a beautiful Author.

Before such a question, as before several others when they recurred, he would come to a pause, leaning his arms on the old parapet and losing himself in a far excursion. He had as to so many of the matters in hand a divided view, and this was exactly what made him reach out, in his unrest, for some idea, lurking in the vast freshness of the night, at the breath of which disparities would submit to fusion, and so, spreading beneath him, make him feel that he floated. What he kept finding himself return to, disturbingly enough, was the reflection, deeper than anything else, that in forming a new and intimate tie he should in a manner abandon, or at the best signally relegate, his daughter. He should reduce to definite form the idea that he had lost her — as was indeed inevitable — by her own marriage; he should reduce to definite form the idea of his having incurred an injury, or at the best an inconvenience, that required some makeweight and deserved some amends. And he should do this the more, which was the great point, that he should appear to adopt, in doing it, the sentiment, in fact the very conviction, entertained, and quite sufficiently expressed, by Maggie herself, in her beautiful generosity, as to what he had suffered — putting it with extravagance — at her hands. If she put it with extravagance the extravagance was yet sincere, for it came — which she put with extravagance too — from her persistence, always, in thinking, feeling, talking about him, as young. He had had glimpses of moments when to hear her thus, in her absolutely unforced compunction, one would have supposed the special edge of the wrong she had done him to consist in his having still before him years and years to groan under it. She had sacrificed a parent, the pearl of parents, no older than herself: it wouldn't so much have mattered if he had been of common parental age. That he wasn't, that he was just her extraordinary equal and contemporary, this was what added to her act the long train of its effect. Light broke for him at last, indeed, quite as a consequence of the fear of breathing a chill upon this luxuriance of her spiritual garden. As at a turn of his labyrinth he saw his issue, which opened out so wide, for the minute, that he held his breath with wonder. He was afterwards to recall how, just then, the autumn night seemed to clear to a view in which the whole place, everything round him, the wide terrace where he stood, the others, with their steps, below, the gardens, the park, the lake, the circling woods, lay there as under some strange midnight sun. It all met him during these instants as a vast expanse of discovery, a world that looked, so lighted, extraordinarily new, and in which familiar objects had taken on a distinctness that, as if it had been a loud, a spoken pretension to beauty, interest, importance, to he scarce knew what, gave them an inordinate quantity of character and, verily, an inordinate size. This hallucination, or whatever he might have called it, was brief, but it lasted long enough to leave him gasping. The gasp of admiration had by this time, however, lost itself in an intensity that

quickly followed — the way the wonder of it, since wonder was in question, truly had been the strange DELAY of his vision. He had these several days groped and groped for an object that lay at his feet and as to which his blindness came from his stupidly looking beyond. It had sat all the while at his hearth-stone, whence it now gazed up in his face.

Once he had recognised it there everything became coherent. The sharp point to which all his light converged was that the whole call of his future to him, as a father, would be in his so managing that Maggie would less and less appear to herself to have forsaken him. And it not only wouldn't be decently humane, decently possible, not to make this relief easy to her — the idea shone upon him, more than that, as exciting, inspiring, uplifting. It fell in so beautifully with what might be otherwise possible; it stood there absolutely confronted with the material way in which it might be met. The way in which it might be met was by his putting his child at peace, and the way to put her at peace was to provide for his future — that is for hers — by marriage, by a marriage as good, speaking proportionately, as hers had been. As he fairly inhaled this measure of refreshment he tasted the meaning of recent agitations. He had seen that Charlotte could contribute — what he hadn't seen was what she could contribute TO. When it had all supremely cleared up and he had simply settled this service to his daughter well before him as the proper direction of his young friend's leisure, the cool darkness had again closed round him, but his moral lucidity was constituted. It wasn't only moreover that the word, with a click, so fitted the riddle, but that the riddle, in such perfection, fitted the word. He might have been equally in want and yet not have had his remedy. Oh, if Charlotte didn't accept him, of course the remedy would fail; but, as everything had fallen together, it was at least there to be tried. And success would be great — that was his last throb — if the measure of relief effected for Maggie should at all prove to have been given by his own actual sense of felicity. He really didn't know when in his life he had thought of anything happier. To think of it merely for himself would have been, even as he had just lately felt, even doing all justice to that condition — yes, impossible. But there was a grand difference in thinking of it for his child.

XII

It was at Brighton, above all, that this difference came out; it was during the three wonderful days he spent there with Charlotte that he had acquainted himself further — though doubtless not even now quite completely — with the merits of his majestic scheme. And while, moreover, to begin with, he still but held his vision in place, steadying it fairly with his hands, as he had often steadied, for inspection, a precarious old pot or kept a glazed picture in its right relation to the light, the other, the outer presumptions in his favour, those independent of what he might himself contribute and that therefore, till he should "speak," remained necessarily vague — that quantity, I say, struck him as positively multiplying, as putting on, in the fresh Brighton air and on the sunny Brighton front, a kind of tempting palpability. He liked, in this preliminary stage, to feel that he should be able to "speak" and that he would; the word itself being romantic, pressing for him the spring of association with stories and plays where handsome and ardent young men, in uniforms, tights, cloaks, high-boots, had it, in soliloquies, ever on their lips; and the sense on the first day that he should probably have taken the great step before the second was over conduced already to make him say to his companion that they must spend more than their mere night or two. At his ease on the ground of what was before him he at all events definitely desired to be, and it was strongly his impression that he was proceeding step by step. He was acting — it kept coming back to that — not in the dark, but in the high golden morning; not in precipitation, flurry, fever, dangers these of the path of passion properly so called, but with the deliberation of a plan, a plan that might be a thing of less joy than a passion, but that probably would, in compensation for that loss, be found to have the essential property, to wear even the decent dignity, of reaching further and of providing for more contingencies. The season was, in local parlance, "on," the elements were assembled; the big windy hotel, the draughty social hall, swarmed with "types," in Charlotte's constant phrase, and resounded with a din in which the wild music of gilded and befrogged bands, Croatian, Dalmatian, Carpathian, violently exotic and nostalgic, was distinguished as struggling against the perpetual popping of corks. Much of this would decidedly have disconcerted our friends if it hadn't all happened, more preponderantly, to give them the brighter surprise. The noble privacy of Fawns had left them — had left Mr. Verver at least — with a little accumulated sum of tolerance to spend on the high pitch and high colour of the public sphere. Fawns, as it had been for him, and as Maggie and Fanny Assingham had both attested, was out of the world, whereas the scene actually about him, with the very sea a mere big booming medium for excursions and aquariums, affected him as so plump in the conscious centre that nothing could have been more complete for representing that pulse of life which they had come to unanimity at home on the subject of their advisedly not hereafter forgetting. The pulse of life was what Charlotte, in her way, at home, had lately reproduced, and there were positively current hours when it might have been open to her companion to feel himself again indebted to her for introductions. He had "brought" her, to put it crudely, but it was almost as if she were herself, in her greater gaiety, her livelier curiosity and intensity, her readier, happier irony, taking him about and showing him the place. No one, really, when he came to think, had ever taken him about before — it had always been he, of old, who took others and who in particular took Maggie. This quickly fell into its relation with him as part of an experience — marking for him, no doubt, what people call, considerately, a time of life; a new and pleasant order, a flattered passive state, that might become — why shouldn't it? — one of the comforts of the future.

Mr. Gutermann-Seuss proved, on the second day — our friend had waited till then — a remarkably genial, a positively lustrous young man occupying a small neat house in a quarter of the place remote from the front and living, as immediate and striking signs testified, in the bosom of his family. Our visitors found themselves introduced, by the operation of close contiguity, to a numerous group of ladies and gentlemen older and younger, and of children larger and smaller, who mostly affected them as scarce less anointed for hospitality and who produced at first the impression of a birthday party, of some anniversary gregariously and religiously kept, though they subsequently fell into their places as members of one quiet domestic circle, preponderantly and directly indebted for their being, in fact, to Mr. Gutermann-Seuss. To the casual eye a mere smart and shining youth of less than thirty summers, faultlessly appointed in every particular, he yet stood among his progeny — eleven in all, as he confessed without a sigh, eleven little brown clear faces, yet with such impersonal old eyes astride of such impersonal old noses — while he entertained the great American collector whom he had so long hoped he might meet, and whose charming companion, the handsome, frank, familiar

young lady, presumably Mrs. Verver, noticed the graduated offspring, noticed the fat, ear-ringed aunts and the glossy, cockneyfied, familiar uncles, inimitable of accent and assumption, and of an attitude of cruder intention than that of the head of the firm; noticed the place in short, noticed the treasure produced, noticed everything, as from the habit of a person finding her account at any time, according to a wisdom well learned of life, in almost any "funny" impression. It really came home to her friend on the spot that this free range of observation in her, picking out the frequent funny with extraordinary promptness, would verily henceforth make a different thing for him of such experiences, of the customary hunt for the possible prize, the inquisitive play of his accepted monomania; which different thing could probably be a lighter and perhaps thereby a somewhat more boisterously refreshing form of sport. Such omens struck him as vivid, in any case, when Mr. Gutermann-Seuss, with a sharpness of discrimination he had at first scarce seemed to promise, invited his eminent couple into another room, before the threshold of which the rest of the tribe, unanimously faltering, dropped out of the scene. The treasure itself here, the objects on behalf of which Mr. Verver's interest had been booked, established quickly enough their claim to engage the latter's attention; yet at what point of his past did our friend's memory, looking back and back, catch him, in any such place, thinking so much less of wares artfully paraded than of some other and quite irrelevant presence? Such places were not strange to him when they took the form of bourgeois back-parlours, a trifle ominously grey and grim from their north light, at watering-places prevailingly homes of humbug, or even when they wore some aspect still less, if not perhaps still more, insidious. He had been everywhere, pried and prowled everywhere, going, on occasion, so far as to risk, he believed, life, health and the very bloom of honour; but where, while precious things, extracted one by one from thrice-locked yet often vulgar drawers and soft satchels of old oriental ilk, were impressively ranged before him, had he, till now, let himself, in consciousness, wander like one of the vague?

He didn't betray it — ah THAT he knew; but two recognitions took place for him at once, and one of them suffered a little in sweetness by the confusion. Mr. Gutermann-Seuss had truly, for the crisis, the putting down of his cards, a rare manner; he was perfect master of what not to say to such a personage as Mr. Verver while the particular importance that dispenses with chatter was diffused by his movements themselves, his repeated act of passage between a featureless mahogany meuble and a table so virtuously disinterested as to look fairly smug under a cotton cloth of faded maroon and indigo, all redolent of patriarchal teas. The Damascene tiles, successively, and oh so tenderly, unmuffled and revealed, lay there at last in their full harmony and their venerable splendour, but the tribute of appreciation and decision was, while the spectator considered, simplified to a point that but just failed of representing levity on the part of a man who had always acknowledged without shame, in such affairs, the intrinsic charm of what was called discussion. The infinitely ancient, the immemorial amethystine blue of the glaze, scarcely more meant to be breathed upon, it would seem, than the cheek of royalty — this property of the ordered and matched array had inevitably all its determination for him, but his submission was, perhaps for the first time in his life, of the quick mind alone, the process really itself, in its way, as fine as the perfection perceived and admired: every inch of the rest of him being given to the foreknowledge that an hour or two later he should have "spoken." The burning of his ships therefore waited too near to let him handle his opportunity with his usual firm and sentient fingers — waited somehow in the predominance of Charlotte's very person, in her being there exactly as she was, capable, as Mr. Gutermann-Seuss himself was capable, of the right felicity of silence, but with an embracing ease, through it all, that made deferred criticism as fragrant as some joy promised a lover by his mistress, or as a big bridal bouquet held patiently behind her. He couldn't otherwise have explained, surely, why he found himself thinking, to his enjoyment, of so many other matters than the felicity of his acquisition and the figure of his cheque, quite equally high; any more than why, later on, with their return to the room in which they had been received and the renewed encompassment of the tribe, he felt quite merged in the elated circle formed by the girl's free response to the collective caress of all the shining eyes, and by her genial acceptance of the heavy cake and port wine that, as she was afterwards to note, added to their transaction, for a finish, the touch of some mystic rite of old Jewry.

This characterisation came from her as they walked away — walked together, in the waning afternoon, back to the breezy sea and the bustling front, back to the nimble and the flutter and the shining shops that sharpened the grin of solicitation on the mask of night. They were walking thus, as he felt, nearer and nearer to where he should see his ships burn, and it was meanwhile for him quite as if this red glow would impart, at the harmonious hour, a lurid grandeur to his good faith. It was meanwhile too a sign of the kind of sensibility

often playing up in him that — fabulous as this truth may sound — he found a sentimental link, an obligation of delicacy, or perhaps even one of the penalties of its opposite, in his having exposed her to the north light, the quite properly hard business-light, of the room in which they had been alone with the treasure and its master. She had listened to the name of the sum he was capable of looking in the face. Given the relation of intimacy with him she had already, beyond all retractation, accepted, the stir of the air produced at the other place by that high figure struck him as a thing that, from the moment she had exclaimed or protested as little as he himself had apologised, left him but one thing more to do. A man of decent feeling didn't thrust his money, a huge lump of it, in such a way, under a poor girl's nose — a girl whose poverty was, after a fashion, the very basis of her enjoyment of his hospitality — without seeing, logically, a responsibility attached. And this was to remain none the less true for the fact that twenty minutes later, after he had applied his torch, applied it with a sign or two of insistence, what might definitely result failed to be immediately clear. He had spoken — spoken as they sat together on the out-of-the-way bench observed during one of their walks and kept for the previous quarter of the present hour well in his memory's eye; the particular spot to which, between intense pauses and intenser advances, he had all the while consistently led her. Below the great consolidated cliff, well on to where the city of stucco sat most architecturally perched, with the rumbling beach and the rising tide and the freshening stars in front and above, the safe sense of the whole place yet prevailed in lamps and seats and flagged walks, hovering also overhead in the close neighbourhood of a great replete community about to assist anew at the removal of dish-covers.

"We've had, as it seems to me, such quite beautiful days together, that I hope it won't come to you too much as a shock when I ask if you think you could regard me with any satisfaction as a husband." As if he had known she wouldn't, she of course couldn't, at all gracefully, and whether or no, reply with a rush, he had said a little more — quite as he had felt he must in thinking it out in advance. He had put the question on which there was no going back and which represented thereby the sacrifice of his vessels, and what he further said was to stand for the redoubled thrust of flame that would make combustion sure. "This isn't sudden to me, and I've wondered at moments if you haven't felt me coming to it. I've been coming ever since we left Fawns — I really started while we were there." He spoke slowly, giving her, as he desired, time to think; all the more that it was making her look at him steadily, and making her also, in a remarkable degree, look "well" while she did so — a large and, so far, a happy, consequence. She wasn't at all events shocked — which he had glanced at but for a handsome humility — and he would give her as many minutes as she liked. "You mustn't think I'm forgetting that I'm not young."

"Oh, that isn't so. It's I that am old. You ARE young." This was what she had at first answered — and quite in the tone too of having taken her minutes. It had not been wholly to the point, but it had been kind — which was what he most wanted. And she kept, for her next words, to kindness, kept to her clear, lowered voice and unshrinking face. "To me too it thoroughly seems that these days have been beautiful. I shouldn't be grateful to them if I couldn't more or less have imagined their bringing us to this." She affected him somehow as if she had advanced a step to meet him and yet were at the same time standing still. It only meant, however, doubtless, that she was, gravely and reasonably, thinking — as he exactly desired to make her. If she would but think enough she would probably think to suit him. "It seems to me," she went on, "that it's for YOU to be sure."

"Ah, but I AM sure," said Adam Verver. "On matters of importance I never speak when I'm not. So if you can yourself FACE such a union you needn't in the least trouble."

She had another pause, and she might have been felt as facing it while, through lamplight and dusk, through the breath of the mild, slightly damp southwest, she met his eyes without evasion. Yet she had at the end of another minute debated only to the extent of saying: "I won't pretend I don't think it would be good for me to marry. Good for me, I mean," she pursued, "because I'm so awfully unattached. I should like to be a little less adrift. I should like to have a home. I should like to have an existence. I should like to have a motive for one thing more than another — a motive outside of myself. In fact," she said, so sincerely that it almost showed pain, yet so lucidly that it almost showed humour, "in fact, you know, I want to BE married. It's — well, it's the condition."

"The condition — ?" He was just vague.

"It's the state, I mean. I don't like my own. 'Miss,' among us all, is too dreadful — except for a shopgirl. I don't want to be a horrible English old-maid."

"Oh, you want to be taken care of. Very well then, I'll do it."

“I dare say it’s very much that. Only I don’t see why, for what I speak of,” she smiled— “for a mere escape from my state — I need do quite so MUCH.”

“So much as marry me in particular?”

Her smile was as for true directness. “I might get what I want for less.”

“You think it so much for you to do?”

“Yes,” she presently said, “I think it’s a great deal.”

Then it was that, though she was so gentle, so quite perfect with him, and he felt he had come on far — then it was that of a sudden something seemed to fail and he didn’t quite know where they were. There rose for him, with this, the fact, to be sure, of their disparity, deny it as mercifully and perversely as she would. He might have been her father. “Of course, yes — that’s my disadvantage: I’m not the natural, I’m so far from being the ideal match to your youth and your beauty. I’ve the drawback that you’ve seen me always, so inevitably, in such another light.”

But she gave a slow headshake that made contradiction soft — made it almost sad, in fact, as from having to be so complete; and he had already, before she spoke, the dim vision of some objection in her mind beside which the one he had named was light, and which therefore must be strangely deep. “You don’t understand me. It’s of all that it is for YOU to do — it’s of that I’m thinking.”

Oh, with this, for him, the thing was clearer! “Then you needn’t think. I know enough what it is for me to do.”

But she shook her head again. “I doubt if you know. I doubt if you CAN.”

“And why not, please — when I’ve had you so before me? That I’m old has at least THAT fact about it to the good — that I’ve known you long and from far back.”

“Do you think you’ve ‘known’ me?” asked Charlotte Stant. He hesitated — for the tone of it, and her look with it might have made him doubt. Just these things in themselves, however, with all the rest, with his fixed purpose now, his committed deed, the fine pink glow, projected forward, of his ships, behind him, definitely blazing and crackling — this quantity was to push him harder than any word of her own could warn him. All that she was herself, moreover, was so lighted, to its advantage, by the pink glow. He wasn’t rabid, but he wasn’t either, as a man of a proper spirit, to be frightened. “What is that then — if I accept it — but as strong a reason as I can want for just LEARNING to know you?”

She faced him always — kept it up as for honesty, and yet at the same time, in her odd way, as for mercy. “How can you tell whether if you did you would?”

It was ambiguous for an instant, as she showed she felt. “I mean when it’s a question of learning, one learns sometimes too late.”

“I think it’s a question,” he promptly enough made answer, “of liking you the more just for your saying these things. You should make something,” he added, “of my liking you.”

“I make everything. But are you sure of having exhausted all other ways?”

This, of a truth, enlarged his gaze. “But what other ways?”

“Why, you’ve more ways of being kind than anyone I ever knew.”

“Take it then,” he answered, “that I’m simply putting them all together for you.” She looked at him, on this, long again — still as if it shouldn’t be said she hadn’t given him time or had withdrawn from his view, so to speak, a single inch of her surface. This at least she was fully to have exposed. It represented her as oddly conscientious, and he scarce knew in what sense it affected him. On the whole, however, with admiration. “You’re very, very honourable.”

“It’s just what I want to be. I don’t see,” she added, “why you’re not right, I don’t see why you’re not happy, as you are. I can not ask myself, I can not ask YOU,” she went on, “if you’re really as much at liberty as your universal generosity leads you to assume. Oughtn’t we,” she asked, “to think a little of others? Oughtn’t I, at least, in loyalty — at any rate in delicacy — to think of Maggie?” With which, intensely gentle, so as not to appear too much to teach him his duty, she explained. “She’s everything to you — she has always been. Are you so certain that there’s room in your life — ?”

“For another daughter? — is that what you mean?” She had not hung upon it long, but he had quickly taken her up.

He had not, however, disconcerted her. “For another young woman — very much of her age, and whose relation to her has always been so different from what our marrying would make it. For another companion,” said Charlotte Stant.

“Can’t a man be, all his life then,” he almost fiercely asked, “anything but a father?” But he went on before she could answer. “You talk about differences, but they’ve been already made — as no one knows better than Maggie. She feels the one she made herself by her own marriage — made, I mean, for me. She constantly thinks of it — it allows her no rest. To put her at peace is therefore,” he explained, “what I’m trying, with you, to do. I can’t do it alone, but I can do it with your help. You can make her,” he said, “positively happy about me.”

“About you?” she thoughtfully echoed. “But what can I make her about herself?”

“Oh, if she’s at ease about me the rest will take care of itself. The case,” he declared, “is in your hands. You’ll effectually put out of her mind that I feel she has abandoned me.”

Interest certainly now was what he had kindled in her face, but it was all the more honourable to her, as he had just called it that she should want to see each of the steps of his conviction. “If you’ve been driven to the ‘likes’ of me, mayn’t it show that you’ve felt truly forsaken?”

“Well, I’m willing to suggest that, if I can show at the same time that I feel consoled.”

“But HAVE you,” she demanded, “really felt so?” He hesitated.

“Consoled?”

“Forsaken.”

“No — I haven’t. But if it’s her idea — !” If it was her idea, in short, that was enough. This enunciation of motive, the next moment, however, sounded to him perhaps slightly thin, so that he gave it another touch. “That is if it’s my idea. I happen, you see, to like my idea.”

“Well, it’s beautiful and wonderful. But isn’t it, possibly,” Charlotte asked, “not quite enough to marry me for?”

“Why so, my dear child? Isn’t a man’s idea usually what he does marry for?”

Charlotte, considering, looked as if this might perhaps be a large question, or at all events something of an extension of one they were immediately concerned with. “Doesn’t that a good deal depend on the sort of thing it may be?” She suggested that, about marriage, ideas, as he called them, might differ; with which, however, giving no more time to it, she sounded another question. “Don’t you appear rather to put it to me that I may accept your offer for Maggie’s sake? Somehow” — she turned it over— “I don’t so clearly SEE her quite so much finding reassurance, or even quite so much needing it.”

“Do you then make nothing at all of her having been so ready to leave us?”

Ah, Charlotte on the contrary made much! “She was ready to leave us because she had to be. From the moment the Prince wanted it she could only go with him.”

“Perfectly — so that, if you see your way, she will be able to ‘go with him’ in future as much as she likes.”

Charlotte appeared to examine for a minute, in Maggie’s interest, this privilege — the result of which was a limited concession. “You’ve certainly worked it out!”

“Of course I’ve worked it out — that’s exactly what I HAVE done. She hadn’t for a long time been so happy about anything as at your being there with me.”

“I was to be with you,” said Charlotte, “for her security.”

“Well,” Adam Verver rang out, “this IS her security. You’ve only, if you can’t see it, to ask her.”

“‘Ask’ her?” — the girl echoed it in wonder. “Certainly — in so many words. Telling her you don’t believe me.”

Still she debated. “Do you mean write it to her?”

“Quite so. Immediately. To-morrow.”

“Oh, I don’t think I can write it,” said Charlotte Stant. “When I write to her” — and she looked amused for so different a shade— “it’s about the Principino’s appetite and Dr. Brady’s visits.”

“Very good then — put it to her face to face. We’ll go straight to Paris to meet them.”

Charlotte, at this, rose with a movement that was like a small cry; but her unspoken sense lost itself while she stood with her eyes on him — he keeping his seat as for the help it gave him, a little, to make his appeal go up. Presently, however, a new sense had come to her, and she covered him, kindly, with the expression of it. “I do think, you know, you must rather ‘like’ me.”

“Thank you,” said Adam Verver. “You WILL put it to her yourself then?”

She had another hesitation. “We go over, you say, to meet them?”

“As soon as we can get back to Fawns. And wait there for them, if necessary, till they come.”

“Wait — a — at Fawns?”

“Wait in Paris. That will be charming in itself.”

“You take me to pleasant places.” She turned it over. “You propose to me beautiful things.”

“It rests but with you to make them beautiful and pleasant. You’ve made Brighton — !”

“Ah!” — she almost tenderly protested. “With what I’m doing now?”

“You’re promising me now what I want. Aren’t you promising me,” he pressed, getting up, “aren’t you promising me to abide by what Maggie says?”

Oh, she wanted to be sure she was. “Do you mean she’ll ASK it of me?”

It gave him indeed, as by communication, a sense of the propriety of being himself certain. Yet what was he but certain? “She’ll speak to you. She’ll speak to you FOR me.”

This at last then seemed to satisfy her. “Very good. May we wait again to talk of it till she has done so?” He showed, with his hands down in his pockets and his shoulders expressively up, a certain disappointment. Soon enough, none the less, his gentleness was all back and his patience once more exemplary. “Of course I give you time. Especially,” he smiled, “as it’s time that I shall be spending with you. Our keeping on together will help you perhaps to see. To see, I mean, how I need you.”

“I already see,” said Charlotte, “how you’ve persuaded yourself you do.” But she had to repeat it. “That isn’t, unfortunately, all.”

“Well then, how you’ll make Maggie right.”

“‘Right’?” She echoed it as if the word went far. And “O — oh!” she still critically murmured as they moved together away.

XIII

He had talked to her of their waiting in Paris, a week later, but on the spot there this period of patience suffered no great strain. He had written to his daughter, not indeed from Brighton, but directly after their return to Fawns, where they spent only forty-eight hours before resuming their journey; and Maggie's reply to his news was a telegram from Rome, delivered to him at noon of their fourth day and which he brought out to Charlotte, who was seated at that moment in the court of the hotel, where they had agreed that he should join her for their proceeding together to the noontide meal. His letter, at Fawns — a letter of several pages and intended lucidly, unreservedly, in fact all but triumphantly, to inform — had proved, on his sitting down to it, and a little to his surprise, not quite so simple a document to frame as even his due consciousness of its weight of meaning had allowed him to assume: this doubtless, however, only for reasons naturally latent in the very wealth of that consciousness, which contributed to his message something of their own quality of impatience. The main result of their talk, for the time, had been a difference in his relation to his young friend, as well as a difference, equally sensible, in her relation to himself; and this in spite of his not having again renewed his undertaking to "speak" to her so far even as to tell her of the communication despatched to Rome. Delicacy, a delicacy more beautiful still, all the delicacy she should want, reigned between them — it being rudimentary, in their actual order, that she mustn't be further worried until Maggie should have put her at her ease.

It was just the delicacy, however, that in Paris — which, suggestively, was Brighton at a hundredfold higher pitch — made, between him and his companion, the tension, made the suspense, made what he would have consented perhaps to call the provisional peculiarity, of present conditions. These elements acted in a manner of their own, imposing and involving, under one head, many abstentions and precautions, twenty anxieties and reminders — things, verily, he would scarce have known how to express; and yet creating for them at every step an acceptance of their reality. He was hanging back, with Charlotte, till another person should intervene for their assistance, and yet they had, by what had already occurred, been carried on to something it was out of the power of other persons to make either less or greater. Common conventions — that was what was odd — had to be on this basis more thought of; those common conventions that, previous to the passage by the Brighton strand, he had so enjoyed the sense of their overlooking. The explanation would have been, he supposed — or would have figured it with less of unrest — that Paris had, in its way, deeper voices and warnings, so that if you went at all "far" there it laid bristling traps, as they might have been viewed, all smothered in flowers, for your going further still. There were strange appearances in the air, and before you knew it you might be unmistakably matching them. Since he wished therefore to match no appearance but that of a gentleman playing with perfect fairness any game in life he might be called to, he found himself, on the receipt of Maggie's missive, rejoicing with a certain inconsistency. The announcement made her from home had, in the act, cost some biting of his pen to sundry parts of him — his personal modesty, his imagination of her prepared state for so quick a jump, it didn't much matter which — and yet he was more eager than not for the drop of delay and for the quicker transitions promised by the arrival of the imminent pair. There was after all a hint of offence to a man of his age in being taken, as they said at the shops, on approval. Maggie, certainly, would have been as far as Charlotte herself from positively desiring this, and Charlotte, on her side, as far as Maggie from holding him light as a real value. She made him fidget thus, poor girl, but from generous rigour of conscience.

These allowances of his spirit were, all the same, consistent with a great gladness at the sight of the term of his ordeal; for it was the end of his seeming to agree that questions and doubts had a place. The more he had inwardly turned the matter over the more it had struck him that they had in truth only an ugliness. What he could have best borne, as he now believed, would have been Charlotte's simply saying to him that she didn't like him enough. This he wouldn't have enjoyed, but he would quite have understood it and been able ruefully to submit. She did like him enough — nothing to contradict that had come out for him; so that he was restless for her as well as for himself. She looked at him hard a moment when he handed her his telegram, and the look, for what he fancied a dim, shy fear in it, gave him perhaps his best moment of conviction that — as a man, so to speak — he properly pleased her. He said nothing — the words sufficiently did it for him, doing it again better still as Charlotte, who had left her chair at his approach, murmured them out. "We start to-night to bring you all our love and joy and sympathy." There they were, the words, and what did she want more?

She didn't, however, as she gave him back the little unfolded leaf, say they were enough — though he saw, the next moment, that her silence was probably not disconnected from her having just visibly turned pale. Her extraordinarily fine eyes, as it was his present theory that he had always thought them, shone at him the more darkly out of this change of colour; and she had again, with it, her apparent way of subjecting herself, for explicit honesty and through her willingness to face him, to any view he might take, all at his ease, and even to wantonness, of the condition he produced in her. As soon as he perceived that emotion kept her soundless he knew himself deeply touched, since it proved that, little as she professed, she had been beautifully hoping. They stood there a minute while he took in from this sign that, yes then, certainly she liked him enough — liked him enough to make him, old as he was ready to brand himself, flush for the pleasure of it. The pleasure of it accordingly made him speak first. "Do you begin, a little, to be satisfied?"

Still, however, she had to think. "We've hurried them, you see. Why so breathless a start?"

"Because they want to congratulate us. They want," said Adam Verver, "to SEE our happiness."

She wondered again — and this time also, for him, as publicly as possible. "So much as that?"

"Do you think it's too much?"

She continued to think plainly. "They weren't to have started for another week."

"Well, what then? Isn't our situation worth the little sacrifice? We'll go back to Rome as soon as you like WITH them."

This seemed to hold her — as he had previously seen her held, just a trifle inscrutably, by his allusions to what they would do together on a certain contingency. "Worth it, the little sacrifice, for whom? For us, naturally — yes," she said. "We want to see them — for our reasons. That is," she rather dimly smiled, "YOU do."

"And you do, my dear, too!" he bravely declared. "Yes then — I do too," she after an instant ungrudging enough acknowledged. "For us, however, something depends on it."

"Rather! But does nothing depend on it for them?"

"What CAN — from the moment that, as appears, they don't want to nip us in the bud? I can imagine their rushing up to prevent us. But an enthusiasm for us that can wait so very little — such intense eagerness, I confess," she went on, "more than a little puzzles me. You may think me," she also added, "ungracious and suspicious, but the Prince can't at all want to come back so soon. He wanted quite too intensely to get away."

Mr. Verver considered. "Well, hasn't he been away?"

"Yes, just long enough to see how he likes it. Besides," said Charlotte, "he may not be able to join in the rosy view of our case that you impute to her. It can't in the least have appeared to him hitherto a matter of course that you should give his wife a bouncing stepmother."

Adam Verver, at this, looked grave. "I'm afraid then he'll just have to accept from us whatever his wife accepts; and accept it — if he can imagine no better reason — just because she does. That," he declared, "will have to do for him."

His tone made her for a moment meet his face; after which, "Let me," she abruptly said, "see it again" — taking from him the folded leaf that she had given back and he had kept in his hand. "Isn't the whole thing," she asked when she had read it over, "perhaps but a way like another for their gaining time?"

He again stood staring; but the next minute, with that upward spring of his shoulders and that downward pressure of his pockets which she had already, more than once, at disconcerted moments, determined in him, he turned sharply away and wandered from her in silence. He looked about in his small despair; he crossed the hotel court, which, overarched and glazed, muffled against loud sounds and guarded against crude sights, heated, gilded, draped, almost carpeted, with exotic trees in tubs, exotic ladies in chairs, the general exotic accent and presence suspended, as with wings folded or feebly fluttering, in the superior, the supreme, the inexorably enveloping Parisian medium, resembled some critical apartment of large capacity, some "dental," medical, surgical waiting-room, a scene of mixed anxiety and desire, preparatory, for gathered barbarians, to the due amputation or extraction of excrescences and redundancies of barbarism. He went as far as the porte-cochere, took counsel afresh of his usual optimism, sharpened even, somehow, just here, by the very air he tasted, and then came back smiling to Charlotte. "It is incredible to you that when a man is still as much in love as Amerigo his most natural impulse should be to feel what his wife feels, to believe what she believes, to want what she wants? — in the absence, that is, of special impediments to his so doing." The manner of it operated — she acknowledged with no great delay this natural possibility. "No — nothing is incredible to me of people immensely in love."

"Well, isn't Amerigo immensely in love?"

She hesitated but as for the right expression of her sense of the degree — but she after all adopted Mr. Verver's. "Immensely."

"Then there you are!"

She had another smile, however — she wasn't there quite yet. "That isn't all that's wanted."

"But what more?"

"Why that his wife shall have made him really believe that SHE really believes." With which Charlotte became still more lucidly logical. "The reality of his belief will depend in such a case on the reality of hers. The Prince may for instance now," she went on, "have made out to his satisfaction that Maggie may mainly desire to abound in your sense, whatever it is you do. He may remember that he has never seen her do anything else."

"Well," said Adam Verver, "what kind of a warning will he have found in that? To what catastrophe will he have observed such a disposition in her to lead?"

"Just to THIS one!" With which she struck him as rising straighter and clearer before him than she had done even yet.

"Our little question itself?" Her appearance had in fact, at the moment, such an effect on him that he could answer but in marvelling mildness. "Hadn't we better wait a while till we call it a catastrophe?"

Her rejoinder to this was to wait — though by no means as long as he meant. When at the end of her minute she spoke, however, it was mildly too. "What would you like, dear friend, to wait for?" It lingered between them in the air, this demand, and they exchanged for the time a look which might have made each of them seem to have been watching in the other the signs of its overt irony. These were indeed immediately so visible in Mr. Verver's face that, as if a little ashamed of having so markedly produced them — and as if also to bring out at last, under pressure, something she had all the while been keeping back — she took a jump to pure plain reason. "You haven't noticed for yourself, but I can't quite help noticing, that in spite of what you assume — WE assume, if you like — Maggie wires her joy only to you. She makes no sign of its overflow to me."

It was a point — and, staring a moment, he took account of it. But he had, as before, his presence of mind — to say nothing of his kindly humour. "Why, you complain of the very thing that's most charmingly conclusive! She treats us already as ONE."

Clearly now, for the girl, in spite of lucidity and logic, there was something in the way he said things — ! She faced him in all her desire to please him, and then her word quite simply and definitely showed it. "I do like you, you know."

Well, what could this do but stimulate his humour? "I see what's the matter with you. You won't be quiet till you've heard from the Prince himself. I think," the happy man added, "that I'll go and secretly wire to him that you'd like, reply paid, a few words for yourself."

It could apparently but encourage her further to smile. "Reply paid for him, you mean — or for me?"

"Oh, I'll pay, with pleasure, anything back for you — as many words as you like." And he went on, to keep it up. "Not requiring either to see your message."

She could take it, visibly, as he meant it. "Should you require to see the Prince's?"

"Not a bit. You can keep that also to yourself."

On his speaking, however, as if his transmitting the hint were a real question, she appeared to consider — and almost as if for good taste — that the joke had gone far enough. "It doesn't matter. Unless he speaks of his own movement — ! And why should it be," she asked, "a thing that WOULD occur to him?"

"I really think," Mr. Verver concurred, "that it naturally wouldn't. HE doesn't know you're morbid."

She just wondered — but she agreed. "No — he hasn't yet found it out. Perhaps he will, but he hasn't yet; and I'm willing to give him meanwhile the benefit of the doubt." So with this the situation, to her view, would appear to have cleared had she not too quickly had one of her restless relapses. "Maggie, however, does know I'm morbid. SHE hasn't the benefit."

"Well," said Adam Verver a little wearily at last, "I think I feel that you'll hear from her yet." It had even fairly come over him, under recurrent suggestion, that his daughter's omission WAS surprising. And Maggie had never in her life been wrong for more than three minutes.

"Oh, it isn't that I hold that I've a RIGHT to it," Charlotte the next instant rather oddly qualified — and the observation itself gave him a further push.

"Very well — I shall like it myself."

At this then, as if moved by his way of constantly — and more or less against his own contention — coming round to her, she showed how she could also always, and not less gently, come half way. "I speak of it only as the missing GRACE — the grace that's in everything that Maggie does. It isn't my due" — she kept it up— "but, taking from you that we may still expect it, it will have the touch. It will be beautiful."

"Then come out to breakfast." Mr. Verver had looked at his watch. "It will be here when we get back."

"If it isn't" — and Charlotte smiled as she looked about for a feather boa that she had laid down on descending from her room— "if it isn't it will have had but THAT slight fault."

He saw her boa on the arm of the chair from which she had moved to meet him, and, after he had fetched it, raising it to make its charming softness brush his face — for it was a wondrous product of Paris, purchased under his direct auspices the day before — he held it there a minute before giving it up. "Will you promise me then to be at peace?"

She looked, while she debated, at his admirable present. "I promise you."

"Quite for ever?"

"Quite for ever."

"Remember," he went on, to justify his demand, "remember that in wiring you she'll naturally speak even more for her husband than she has done in wiring me."

It was only at a word that Charlotte had a demur. "'Naturally' — ?"

"Why, our marriage puts him for you, you see — or puts you for him — into a new relation, whereas it leaves his relation to me unchanged. It therefore gives him more to say to you about it."

"About its making me his stepmother-in-law — or whatever I SHOULD become?" Over which, for a little, she not undivertedly mused. "Yes, there may easily be enough for a gentleman to say to a young woman about that."

"Well, Amerigo can always be, according to the case, either as funny or as serious as you like; and whichever he may be for you, in sending you a message, he'll be it ALL." And then as the girl, with one of her so deeply and oddly, yet so tenderly, critical looks at him, failed to take up the remark, he found himself moved, as by a vague anxiety, to add a question. "Don't you think he's charming?"

"Oh, charming," said Charlotte Stant. "If he weren't I shouldn't mind."

"No more should I!" her friend harmoniously returned.

"Ah, but you DON'T mind. You don't have to. You don't have to, I mean, as I have. It's the last folly ever to care, in an anxious way, the least particle more than one is absolutely forced. If I were you," she went on— "if I had in my life, for happiness and power and peace, even a small fraction of what you have, it would take a great deal to make me waste my worry. I don't know," she said, "what in the world — that didn't touch my luck — I should trouble my head about."

"I quite understand you — yet doesn't it just depend," Mr. Verver asked, "on what you call one's luck? It's exactly my luck that I'm talking about. I shall be as sublime as you like when you've made me all right. It's only when one is right that one really has the things you speak of. It isn't they," he explained, "that make one so: it's the something else I want that makes THEM right. If you'll give me what I ask, you'll see."

She had taken her boa and thrown it over her shoulders, and her eyes, while she still delayed, had turned from him, engaged by another interest, though the court was by this time, the hour of dispersal for luncheon, so forsaken that they would have had it, for free talk, should they have been moved to loudness, quite to themselves. She was ready for their adjournment, but she was also aware of a pedestrian youth, in uniform, a visible emissary of the Postes et Telegraphes, who had approached, from the street, the small stronghold of the concierge and who presented there a missive taken from the little cartridge-box slung over his shoulder. The portress, meeting him on the threshold, met equally, across the court, Charlotte's marked attention to his visit, so that, within the minute, she had advanced to our friends with her cap-streamers flying and her smile of announcement as ample as her broad white apron. She raised aloft a telegraphic message and, as she delivered it, sociably discriminated. "Cette fois-ci pour madame!" — with which she as genially retreated, leaving Charlotte in possession. Charlotte, taking it, held it at first unopened. Her eyes had come back to her companion, who had immediately and triumphantly greeted it. "Ah, there you are!"

She broke the envelope then in silence, and for a minute, as with the message he himself had put before her, studied its contents without a sign. He watched her without a question, and at last she looked up. "I'll give you," she simply said, "what you ask."

The expression of her face was strange — but since when had a woman's at moments of supreme surrender not a right to be? He took it in with his own long look and his grateful silence — so that nothing more, for some instants, passed between them. Their understanding sealed itself — he already felt that she had made him right. But he was in presence too of the fact that Maggie had made HER so; and always, therefore, without Maggie, where, in fine, would he be? She united them, brought them together as with the click of a silver spring, and, on the spot, with the vision of it, his eyes filled, Charlotte facing him meanwhile with her expression made still stranger by the blur of his gratitude. Through it all, however, he smiled. "What my child does for me — !"

Through it all as well, that is still through the blur, he saw Charlotte, rather than heard her, reply. She held her paper wide open, but her eyes were all for his. "It isn't Maggie. It's the Prince."

"I SAY!" — he gaily rang out. "Then it's best of all."

"It's enough."

"Thank you for thinking so!" To which he added "It's enough for our question, but it isn't — is it? quite enough for our breakfast? Dejeunons."

She stood there, however, in spite of this appeal, her document always before them. "Don't you want to read it?"

He thought. "Not if it satisfies you. I don't require it."

But she gave him, as for her conscience, another chance. "You can if you like."

He hesitated afresh, but as for amiability, not for curiosity. "Is it funny?"

Thus, finally, she again dropped her eyes on it, drawing in her lips a little. "No — I call it grave."

"Ah, then, I don't want it."

"Very grave," said Charlotte Stant.

"Well, what did I tell you of him?" he asked, rejoicing, as they started: a question for all answer to which, before she took his arm, the girl thrust her paper, crumpled, into the pocket of her coat.

PART THIRD

XIV

Charlotte, half way up the "monumental" staircase, had begun by waiting alone — waiting to be rejoined by her companion, who had gone down all the way, as in common kindness bound, and who, his duty performed, would know where to find her. She was meanwhile, though extremely apparent, not perhaps absolutely advertised; but she would not have cared if she had been — so little was it, by this time, her first occasion of facing society with a consciousness materially, with a confidence quite splendidly, enriched. For a couple of years now she had known as never before what it was to look "well" — to look, that is, as well as she had always felt, from far back, that, in certain conditions, she might. On such an evening as this, that of a great official party in the full flush of the London spring-time, the conditions affected her, her nerves, her senses, her imagination, as all profusely present; so that perhaps at no moment yet had she been so justified of her faith as at the particular instant of our being again concerned with her, that of her chancing to glance higher up from where she stood and meeting in consequence the quiet eyes of Colonel Assingham, who had his elbows on the broad balustrade of the great gallery overhanging the staircase and who immediately exchanged with her one of his most artlessly familiar signals. This simplicity of his visual attention struck her, even with the other things she had to think about, as the quietest note in the whole high pitch — much, in fact, as if she had pressed a finger on a chord or a key and created, for the number of seconds, an arrest of vibration, a more muffled thump. The sight of him suggested indeed that Fanny would be there, though so far as opportunity went she had not seen her. This was about the limit of what it could suggest.

The air, however, had suggestions enough — it abounded in them, many of them precisely helping to constitute those conditions with which, for our young woman, the hour was brilliantly crowned. She was herself in truth crowned, and it all hung together, melted together, in light and colour and sound: the unsurpassed diamonds that her head so happily carried, the other jewels, the other perfections of aspect and arrangement that made her personal scheme a success, the PROVED private theory that materials to work with had been all she required and that there were none too precious for her to understand and use — to which might be added lastly, as the strong-scented flower of the total sweetness, an easy command, a high enjoyment, of her crisis. For a crisis she was ready to take it, and this ease it was, doubtless, that helped her, while she waited, to the right assurance, to the right indifference, to the right expression, and above all, as she felt, to the right view of her opportunity for happiness — unless indeed the opportunity itself, rather, were, in its mere strange amplitude, the producing, the precipitating cause. The ordered revellers, rustling and shining, with sweep of train and glitter of star and clink of sword, and yet, for all this, but so imperfectly articulate, so vaguely vocal — the double stream of the coming and the going, flowing together where she stood, passed her, brushed her, treated her to much crude contemplation and now and then to a spasm of speech, an offered hand, even in some cases to an unencouraged pause; but she missed no countenance and invited no protection: she fairly liked to be, so long as she might, just as she was — exposed a little to the public, no doubt, in her unaccompanied state, but, even if it were a bit brazen, careless of queer reflections on the dull polish of London faces, and exposed, since it was a question of exposure, to much more competent recognitions of her own. She hoped no one would stop — she was positively keeping herself; it was her idea to mark in a particular manner the importance of something that had just happened. She knew how she should mark it, and what she was doing there made already a beginning.

When presently, therefore, from her standpoint, she saw the Prince come back she had an impression of all the place as higher and wider and more appointed for great moments; with its dome of lustres lifted, its ascents and descents more majestic, its marble tiers more vividly overhung, its numerosity of royalties, foreign and domestic, more unprecedented, its symbolism of "State" hospitality both emphasised and refined. This was doubtless a large consequence of a fairly familiar cause, a considerable inward stir to spring from the mere vision, striking as that might be, of Amerigo in a crowd; but she had her reasons, she held them there, she carried them in fact, responsibly and overtly, as she carried her head, her high tiara, her folded fan, her indifferent, unattended eminence; and it was when he reached her and she could, taking his arm, show herself as placed in her relation, that she felt supremely justified. It was her notion of course that she gave a glimpse of but few of her grounds for this discrimination — indeed of the most evident alone; yet she would have been half willing it should be guessed how she drew inspiration, drew support, in quantity sufficient for almost anything, from the individual value that, through all the picture, her husband's son-in-law kept for the eye, deriving it from his fine unconscious way, in the swarming social sum, of outshining, overlooking and

overtopping. It was as if in separation, even the shortest, she half forgot or disbelieved how he affected her sight, so that reappearance had, in him, each time, a virtue of its own — a kind of disproportionate intensity suggesting his connection with occult sources of renewal. What did he do when he was away from her that made him always come back only looking, as she would have called it, "more so?" Superior to any shade of cabotinage, he yet almost resembled an actor who, between his moments on the stage, revisits his dressing-room and, before the glass, pressed by his need of effect, retouches his make-up. The Prince was at present, for instance, though he had quitted her but ten minutes before, still more than then the person it pleased her to be left with — a truth that had all its force for her while he made her his care for their conspicuous return together to the upper rooms. Conspicuous beyond any wish they could entertain was what, poor wonderful man, he couldn't help making it; and when she raised her eyes again, on the ascent, to Bob Assingham, still aloft in his gallery and still looking down at her, she was aware that, in spite of hovering and warning inward voices, she even enjoyed the testimony rendered by his lonely vigil to the lustre she reflected.

He was always lonely at great parties, the dear Colonel — it wasn't in such places that the seed he sowed at home was ever reaped by him; but nobody could have seemed to mind it less, to brave it with more bronzed indifference; so markedly that he moved about less like one of the guests than like some quite presentable person in charge of the police arrangements or the electric light. To Mrs. Verver, as will be seen, he represented, with the perfect good faith of his apparent blankness, something definite enough; though her bravery was not thereby too blighted for her to feel herself calling him to witness that the only witchcraft her companion had used, within the few minutes, was that of attending Maggie, who had withdrawn from the scene, to her carriage. Notified, at all events, of Fanny's probable presence, Charlotte was, for a while after this, divided between the sense of it as a fact somehow to reckon with and deal with, which was a perception that made, in its degree, for the prudence, the pusillanimity of postponement, of avoidance — and a quite other feeling, an impatience that presently ended by prevailing, an eagerness, really, to BE suspected, sounded, veritably arraigned, if only that she might have the bad moment over, if only that she might prove to herself, let alone to Mrs. Assingham also, that she could convert it to good; if only, in short, to be "square," as they said, with her question. For herself indeed, particularly, it wasn't a question; but something in her bones told her that Fanny would treat it as one, and there was truly nothing that, from this friend, she was not bound in decency to take. She might hand things back with every tender precaution, with acknowledgments and assurances, but she owed it to them, in any case, and it to all Mrs. Assingham had done for her, not to get rid of them without having well unwrapped and turned them over.

To-night, as happened — and she recognised it more and more, with the ebbing minutes, as an influence of everything about her — to-night exactly, she would, no doubt, since she knew why, be as firm as she might at any near moment again hope to be for going through that process with the right temper and tone. She said, after a little, to the Prince, "Stay with me; let no one take you; for I want her, yes, I do want her to see us together, and the sooner the better" — said it to keep her hand on him through constant diversions, and made him, in fact, by saying it, profess a momentary vagueness. She had to explain to him that it was Fanny Assingham, she wanted to see — who clearly would be there, since the Colonel never either stirred without her or, once arrived, concerned himself for her fate; and she had, further, after Amerigo had met her with "See us together? why in the world? hasn't she often seen us together?" to inform him that what had elsewhere and otherwise happened didn't now matter and that she at any rate well knew, for the occasion, what she was about. "You're strange, cara mia," he consentingly enough dropped; but, for whatever strangeness, he kept her, as they circulated, from being waylaid, even remarking to her afresh as he had often done before, on the help rendered, in such situations, by the intrinsic oddity of the London "squash," a thing of vague, slow, senseless eddies, revolving as in fear of some menace of conversation suspended over it, the drop of which, with some consequent refreshing splash or spatter, yet never took place. Of course she was strange; this, as they went, Charlotte knew for herself: how could she be anything else when the situation holding her, and holding him, for that matter, just as much, had so the stamp of it? She had already accepted her consciousness, as we have already noted, that a crisis, for them all, was in the air; and when such hours were not depressing, which was the form indeed in which she had mainly known them, they were apparently in a high degree exhilarating.

Later on, in a corner to which, at sight of an empty sofa, Mrs. Assingham had, after a single attentive arrest, led her with a certain earnestness, this vision of the critical was much more sharpened than blurred. Fanny had taken it from her: yes, she was there with Amerigo alone, Maggie having come with them and

then, within ten minutes, changed her mind, repented and departed. “So you’re staying on together without her?” the elder woman had asked; and it was Charlotte’s answer to this that had determined for them, quite indeed according to the latter’s expectation, the need of some seclusion and her companion’s pounce at the sofa. They were staying on together alone, and — oh distinctly! — it was alone that Maggie had driven away, her father, as usual, not having managed to come. “‘As usual’ — ?” Mrs. Assingham had seemed to wonder; Mr. Verver’s reluctances not having, she in fact quite intimated, hitherto struck her. Charlotte responded, at any rate, that his indisposition to go out had lately much increased — even though to-night, as she admitted, he had pleaded his not feeling well. Maggie had wished to stay with him — for the Prince and she, dining out, had afterwards called in Portland Place, whence, in the event, they had brought her, Charlotte, on. Maggie had come but to oblige her father — she had urged the two others to go without her; then she had yielded, for the time, to Mr. Verver’s persuasion. But here, when they had, after the long wait in the carriage, fairly got in; here, once up the stairs, with the rooms before them, remorse had ended by seizing her: she had listened to no other remonstrance, and at present therefore, as Charlotte put it, the two were doubtless making together a little party at home. But it was all right — so Charlotte also put it: there was nothing in the world they liked better than these snatched felicities, little parties, long talks, with “I’ll come to you to-morrow,” and “No, I’ll come to you,” make-believe renewals of their old life. They were fairly, at times, the dear things, like children playing at paying visits, playing at “Mr. Thompson” and “Mrs. Fane,” each hoping that the other would really stay to tea. Charlotte was sure she should find Maggie there on getting home — a remark in which Mrs. Verver’s immediate response to her friend’s inquiry had culminated. She had thus, on the spot, the sense of having given her plenty to think about, and that moreover of liking to see it even better than she had expected. She had plenty to think about herself, and there was already something in Fanny that made it seem still more.

“You say your husband’s ill? He felt too ill to come?”

“No, my dear — I think not. If he had been too ill I wouldn’t have left him.”

“And yet Maggie was worried?” Mrs. Assingham asked.

“She worries, you know, easily. She’s afraid of influenza — of which he has had, at different times, though never with the least gravity, several attacks.”

“But you’re not afraid of it?”

Charlotte had for a moment a pause; it had continued to come to her that really to have her case “out,” as they said, with the person in the world to whom her most intimate difficulties had oftenest referred themselves, would help her, on the whole, more than hinder; and under that feeling all her opportunity, with nothing kept back; with a thing or two perhaps even thrust forward, seemed temptingly to open. Besides, didn’t Fanny at bottom half expect, absolutely at the bottom half WANT, things? — so that she would be disappointed if, after what must just have occurred for her, she didn’t get something to put between the teeth of her so restless rumination, that cultivation of the fear, of which our young woman had already had glimpses, that she might have “gone too far” in her irrepressible interest in other lives. What had just happened — it pieced itself together for Charlotte — was that the Assingham pair, drifting like everyone else, had had somewhere in the gallery, in the rooms, an accidental concussion; had it after the Colonel, over his balustrade, had observed, in the favouring high light, her public junction with the Prince. His very dryness, in this encounter, had, as always, struck a spark from his wife’s curiosity, and, familiar, on his side, with all that she saw in things, he had thrown her, as a fine little bone to pick, some report of the way one of her young friends was “going on” with another. He knew perfectly — such at least was Charlotte’s liberal assumption — that she wasn’t going on with anyone, but she also knew that, given the circumstances, she was inevitably to be sacrificed, in some form or another, to the humorous intercourse of the inimitable couple. The Prince meanwhile had also, under coercion, sacrificed her; the Ambassador had come up to him with a message from Royalty, to whom he was led away; after which she had talked for five minutes with Sir John Brinder, who had been of the Ambassador’s company and who had rather artlessly remained with her. Fanny had then arrived in sight of them at the same moment as someone else she didn’t know, someone who knew Mrs. Assingham and also knew Sir John. Charlotte had left it to her friend’s competence to throw the two others immediately together and to find a way for entertaining her in closer quarters. This was the little history of the vision, in her, that was now rapidly helping her to recognise a precious chance, the chance that mightn’t again soon be so good for the vivid making of a point. Her point was before her; it was sharp, bright, true; above all it was her own. She had reached it quite by herself; no one, not even Amerigo — Amerigo least of all, who would have nothing to do with it — had given her aid. To make it now with force for Fanny Assingham’s

benefit would see her further, in the direction in which the light had dawned, than any other spring she should, yet awhile, doubtless, be able to press. The direction was that of her greater freedom — which was all in the world she had in mind. Her opportunity had accordingly, after a few minutes of Mrs. Assingham's almost imprudently interested expression of face, positively acquired such a price for her that she may, for ourselves, while the intensity lasted, rather resemble a person holding out a small mirror at arm's length and consulting it with a special turn of the head. It was, in a word, with this value of her chance that she was intelligently playing when she said in answer to Fanny's last question: "Don't you remember what you told me, on the occasion of something or other, the other day? That you believe there's nothing I'm afraid of? So, my dear, don't ask me!"

"Mayn't I ask you," Mrs. Assingham returned, "how the case stands with your poor husband?"

"Certainly, dear. Only, when you ask me as if I mightn't perhaps know what to think, it seems to me best to let you see that I know perfectly what to think."

Mrs. Assingham hesitated; then, blinking a little, she took her risk. "You didn't think that if it was a question of anyone's returning to him, in his trouble, it would be better you yourself should have gone?"

Well, Charlotte's answer to this inquiry visibly shaped itself in the interest of the highest considerations. The highest considerations were good humour, candour, clearness and, obviously, the REAL truth. "If we couldn't be perfectly frank and dear with each other, it would be ever so much better, wouldn't it? that we shouldn't talk about anything at all; which, however, would be dreadful — and we certainly, at any rate, haven't yet come to it. You can ask me anything under the sun you like, because, don't you see? you can't upset me."

"I'm sure, my dear Charlotte," Fanny Assingham laughed, "I don't want to upset you."

"Indeed, love, you simply COULDN'T even if you thought it necessary — that's all I mean. Nobody could, for it belongs to my situation that I'm, by no merit of my own, just fixed — fixed as fast as a pin stuck, up to its head, in a cushion. I'm placed — I can't imagine anyone MORE placed. There I AM!"

Fanny had indeed never listened to emphasis more firmly applied, and it brought into her own eyes, though she had reasons for striving to keep them from betrayals, a sort of anxiety of intelligence. "I dare say — but your statement of your position, however you see it, isn't an answer to my inquiry. It seems to me, at the same time, I confess," Mrs. Assingham added, "to give but the more reason for it. You speak of our being 'frank.' How can we possibly be anything else? If Maggie has gone off through finding herself too distressed to stay, and if she's willing to leave you and her husband to show here without her, aren't the grounds of her preoccupation more or less discussable?"

"If they're not," Charlotte replied, "it's only from their being, in a way, too evident. They're not grounds for me — they weren't when I accepted Adam's preference that I should come to-night without him: just as I accept, absolutely, as a fixed rule, ALL his preferences. But that doesn't alter the fact, of course, that my husband's daughter, rather than his wife, should have felt SHE could, after all, be the one to stay with him, the one to make the sacrifice of this hour — seeing, especially, that the daughter has a husband of her own in the field." With which she produced, as it were, her explanation. "I've simply to see the truth of the matter — see that Maggie thinks more, on the whole, of fathers than of husbands. And my situation is such," she went on, "that this becomes immediately, don't you understand? a thing I have to count with."

Mrs. Assingham, vaguely heaving, panting a little but trying not to show it, turned about, from some inward spring, in her seat. "If you mean such a thing as that she doesn't adore the Prince — !"

"I don't say she doesn't adore him. What I say is that she doesn't think of him. One of those conditions doesn't always, at all stages, involve the other. This is just HOW she adores him," Charlotte said. "And what reason is there, in the world, after all, why he and I shouldn't, as you say, show together? We've shown together, my dear," she smiled, "before."

Her friend, for a little, only looked at her — speaking then with abruptness. "You ought to be absolutely happy. You live with such GOOD people."

The effect of it, as well, was an arrest for Charlotte; whose face, however, all of whose fine and slightly hard radiance, it had caused, the next instant, further to brighten. "Does one ever put into words anything so fatuously rash? It's a thing that must be said, in prudence, FOR one — by somebody who's so good as to take the responsibility: the more that it gives one always a chance to show one's best manners by not contradicting it. Certainly, you'll never have the distress, or whatever, of hearing me complain."

"Truly, my dear, I hope in all conscience not!" and the elder woman's spirit found relief in a laugh more

resonant than was quite advised by their pursuit of privacy.

To this demonstration her friend gave no heed. “With all our absence after marriage, and with the separation from her produced in particular by our so many months in America, Maggie has still arrears, still losses to make up — still the need of showing how, for so long, she simply kept missing him. She missed his company — a large allowance of which is, in spite of everything else, of the first necessity to her. So she puts it in when she can — a little here, a little there, and it ends by making up a considerable amount. The fact of our distinct establishments — which has, all the same, everything in its favour,” Charlotte hastened to declare, “makes her really see more of him than when they had the same house. To make sure she doesn’t fail of it she’s always arranging for it — which she didn’t have to do while they lived together. But she likes to arrange,” Charlotte steadily proceeded; “it peculiarly suits her; and the result of our separate households is really, for them, more contact and more intimacy. To-night, for instance, has been practically an arrangement. She likes him best alone. And it’s the way,” said our young woman, “in which he best likes HER. It’s what I mean therefore by being ‘placed.’ And the great thing is, as they say, to ‘know’ one’s place. Doesn’t it all strike you,” she wound up, “as rather placing the Prince too?”

Fanny Assingham had at this moment the sense as of a large heaped dish presented to her intelligence and inviting it to a feast — so thick were the notes of intention in this remarkable speech. But she also felt that to plunge at random, to help herself too freely, would — apart from there not being at such a moment time for it — tend to jostle the ministering hand, confound the array and, more vulgarly speaking, make a mess. So she picked out, after consideration, a solitary plum. “So placed that YOU have to arrange?”

“Certainly I have to arrange.”

“And the Prince also — if the effect for him is the same?”

“Really, I think, not less.”

“And does he arrange,” Mrs. Assingham asked, “to make up HIS arrears?” The question had risen to her lips — it was as if another morsel, on the dish, had tempted her. The sound of it struck her own ear, immediately, as giving out more of her thought than she had as yet intended; but she quickly saw that she must follow it up, at any risk, with simplicity, and that what was simplest was the ease of boldness. “Make them up, I mean, by coming to see YOU?”

Charlotte replied, however, without, as her friend would have phrased it, turning a hair. She shook her head, but it was beautifully gentle. “He never comes.”

“Oh!” said Fanny Assingham: with which she felt a little stupid. “There it is. He might so well, you know, otherwise.”

“‘Otherwise’?” — and Fanny was still vague.

It passed, this time, over her companion, whose eyes, wandering, to a distance, found themselves held. The Prince was at hand again; the Ambassador was still at his side; they were stopped a moment by a uniformed personage, a little old man, of apparently the highest military character, bristling with medals and orders. This gave Charlotte time to go on. “He has not been for three months.” And then as with her friend’s last word in her ear: “‘Otherwise’ — yes. He arranges otherwise. And in my position,” she added, “I might too. It’s too absurd we shouldn’t meet.”

“You’ve met, I gather,” said Fanny Assingham, “to-night.”

“Yes — as far as that goes. But what I mean is that I might — placed for it as we both are — go to see HIM.”

“And do you?” Fanny asked with almost mistaken solemnity.

The perception of this excess made Charlotte, whether for gravity or for irony, hang fire a minute. “I HAVE been. But that’s nothing,” she said, “in itself, and I tell you of it only to show you how our situation works. It essentially becomes one, a situation, for both of us. The Prince’s, however, is his own affair — I meant but to speak of mine.”

“Your situation’s perfect,” Mrs. Assingham presently declared.

“I don’t say it isn’t. Taken, in fact, all round, I think it is. And I don’t, as I tell you, complain of it. The only thing is that I have to act as it demands of me.”

“To ‘act’?” said Mrs. Assingham with an irrepressible quaver.

“Isn’t it acting, my dear, to accept it? I do accept it. What do you want me to do less?”

“I want you to believe that you’re a very fortunate person.”

“Do you call that LESS?” Charlotte asked with a smile. “From the point of view of my freedom I call it

more. Let it take, my position, any name you like."

"Don't let it, at any rate" — and Mrs. Assingham's impatience prevailed at last over her presence of mind — "don't let it make you think too much of your freedom."

"I don't know what you call too much — for how can I not see it as it is? You'd see your own quickly enough if the Colonel gave you the same liberty — and I haven't to tell you, with your so much greater knowledge of everything, what it is that gives such liberty most. For yourself personally of course," Charlotte went on, "you only know the state of neither needing it nor missing it. Your husband doesn't treat you as of less importance to him than some other woman."

"Ah, don't talk to me of other women!" Fanny now overtly panted. "Do you call Mr. Verver's perfectly natural interest in his daughter — ?"

"The greatest affection of which he is capable?" Charlotte took it up in all readiness. "I do distinctly — and in spite of my having done all I could think of — to make him capable of a greater. I've done, earnestly, everything I could — I've made it, month after month, my study. But I haven't succeeded — it has been vividly brought home to me to-night. However," she pursued, "I've hoped against hope, for I recognise that, as I told you at the time, I was duly warned." And then as she met in her friend's face the absence of any such remembrance: "He did tell me that he wanted me just BECAUSE I could be useful about her." With which Charlotte broke into a wonderful smile. "So you see I AM!"

It was on Fanny Assingham's lips for the moment to reply that this was, on the contrary, exactly what she didn't see; she came in fact within an ace of saying: "You strike me as having quite failed to help his idea to work — since, by your account, Maggie has him not less, but so much more, on her mind. How in the world, with so much of a remedy, comes there to remain so much of what was to be obviated?" But she saved herself in time, conscious above all that she was in presence of still deeper things than she had yet dared to fear, that there was "more in it" than any admission she had made represented — and she had held herself familiar with admissions: so that, not to seem to understand where she couldn't accept, and not to seem to accept where she couldn't approve, and could still less, with precipitation, advise, she invoked the mere appearance of casting no weight whatever into the scales of her young friend's consistency. The only thing was that, as she was quickly enough to feel, she invoked it rather to excess. It brought her, her invocation, too abruptly to her feet. She brushed away everything. "I can't conceive, my dear, what you're talking about!"

Charlotte promptly rose then, as might be, to meet it, and her colour, for the first time, perceptibly heightened. She looked, for the minute, as her companion had looked — as if twenty protests, blocking each other's way, had surged up within her. But when Charlotte had to make a selection, her selection was always the most effective possible. It was happy now, above all, for being made not in anger but in sorrow. "You give me up then?"

"Give you up — ?"

"You forsake me at the hour of my life when it seems to me I most deserve a friend's loyalty? If you do you're not just, Fanny; you're even, I think," she went on, "rather cruel; and it's least of all worthy of you to seem to wish to quarrel with me in order to cover your desertion." She spoke, at the same time, with the noblest moderation of tone, and the image of high, pale, lighted disappointment she meanwhile presented, as of a creature patient and lonely in her splendour, was an impression so firmly imposed that she could fill her measure to the brim and yet enjoy the last word, as it is called in such cases, with a perfection void of any vulgarity of triumph. She merely completed, for truth's sake, her demonstration. "What is a quarrel with me but a quarrel with my right to recognise the conditions of my bargain? But I can carry them out alone," she said as she turned away. She turned to meet the Ambassador and the Prince, who, their colloquy with their Field-Marshal ended, were now at hand and had already, between them, she was aware, addressed her a remark that failed to penetrate the golden glow in which her intelligence was temporarily bathed. She had made her point, the point she had foreseen she must make; she had made it thoroughly and once for all, so that no more making was required; and her success was reflected in the faces of the two men of distinction before her, unmistakably moved to admiration by her exceptional radiance. She at first but watched this reflection, taking no note of any less adequate form of it possibly presented by poor Fanny — poor Fanny left to stare at her incurred "score," chalked up in so few strokes on the wall; then she took in what the Ambassador was saying, in French, what he was apparently repeating to her.

"A desire for your presence, Madame, has been expressed en tres-haut lieu, and I've let myself in for the responsibility, to say nothing of the honour, of seeing, as the most respectful of your friends, that so august an

impatience is not kept waiting." The greatest possible Personage had, in short, according to the odd formula of societies subject to the greatest personages possible, "sent for" her, and she asked, in her surprise, "What in the world does he want to do to me?" only to know, without looking, that Fanny's bewilderment was called to a still larger application, and to hear the Prince say with authority, indeed with a certain prompt dryness: "You must go immediately — it's a summons." The Ambassador, using authority as well, had already somehow possessed himself of her hand, which he drew into his arm, and she was further conscious as she went off with him that, though still speaking for her benefit, Amerigo had turned to Fanny Assingham. He would explain afterwards — besides which she would understand for herself. To Fanny, however, he had laughed — as a mark, apparently, that for this infallible friend no explanation at all would be necessary.

XV

It may be recorded none the less that the Prince was the next moment to see how little any such assumption was founded. Alone with him now Mrs. Assingham was incorruptible. “They send for Charlotte through YOU?”

“No, my dear; as you see, through the Ambassador.”

“Ah, but the Ambassador and you, for the last quarter-of-an-hour, have been for them as one. He’s YOUR ambassador.” It may indeed be further mentioned that the more Fanny looked at it the more she saw in it. “They’ve connected her with you — she’s treated as your appendage.”

“Oh, my ‘appendage,’” the Prince amusedly exclaimed— “cara mia, what a name! She’s treated, rather, say, as my ornament and my glory. And it’s so remarkable a case for a mother-in-law that you surely can’t find fault with it.”

“You’ve ornaments enough, it seems to me — as you’ve certainly glories enough — without her. And she’s not the least little bit,” Mrs. Assingham observed, “your mother-in-law. In such a matter a shade of difference is enormous. She’s no relation to you whatever, and if she’s known in high quarters but as going about with you, then — then — !” She failed, however, as from positive intensity of vision. “Then, then what?” he asked with perfect good-nature.

“She had better in such a case not be known at all.”

“But I assure you I never, just now, so much as mentioned her. Do you suppose I asked them,” said the young man, still amused, “if they didn’t want to see her? You surely don’t need to be shown that Charlotte speaks for herself — that she does so above all on such an occasion as this and looking as she does to-night. How, so looking, can she pass unnoticed? How can she not have ‘success’? Besides,” he added as she but watched his face, letting him say what he would, as if she wanted to see how he would say it, “besides, there IS always the fact that we’re of the same connection, of — what is your word? — the same ‘concern.’ We’re certainly not, with the relation of our respective sposi, simply formal acquaintances. We’re in the same boat” — and the Prince smiled with a candour that added an accent to his emphasis.

Fanny Assingham was full of the special sense of his manner: it caused her to turn for a moment’s refuge to a corner of her general consciousness in which she could say to herself that she was glad SHE wasn’t in love with such a man. As with Charlotte just before, she was embarrassed by the difference between what she took in and what she could say, what she felt and what she could show. “It only appears to me of great importance that — now that you all seem more settled here — Charlotte should be known, for any presentation, any further circulation or introduction, as, in particular, her husband’s wife; known in the least possible degree as anything else. I don’t know what you mean by the ‘same’ boat. Charlotte is naturally in Mr. Verver’s boat.”

“And, pray, am *I* not in Mr. Verver’s boat too? Why, but for Mr. Verver’s boat, I should have been by this time” — and his quick Italian gesture, an expressive direction and motion of his forefinger, pointed to deepest depths— “away down, down, down.” She knew of course what he meant — how it had taken his father-in-law’s great fortune, and taken no small slice, to surround him with an element in which, all too fatally weighted as he had originally been, he could pecuniarily float; and with this reminder other things came to her — how strange it was that, with all allowance for their merit, it should befall some people to be so inordinately valued, quoted, as they said in the stock-market, so high, and how still stranger, perhaps, that there should be cases in which, for some reason, one didn’t mind the so frequently marked absence in them of the purpose really to represent their price. She was thinking, feeling, at any rate, for herself; she was thinking that the pleasure SHE could take in this specimen of the class didn’t suffer from his consent to be merely made buoyant: partly because it was one of those pleasures (he inspired them) that, by their nature, COULDN’T suffer, to whatever proof they were put; and partly because, besides, he after all visibly had on his conscience some sort of return for services rendered. He was a huge expense assuredly — but it had been up to now her conviction that his idea was to behave beautifully enough to make the beauty well nigh an equivalent. And that he had carried out his idea, carried it out by continuing to lead the life, to breathe the air, very nearly to think the thoughts, that best suited his wife and her father — this she had till lately enjoyed the comfort of so distinctly perceiving as to have even been moved more than once, to express to him the happiness it gave her. He had that in his favour as against other matters; yet it discouraged her too, and rather

oddly, that he should so keep moving, and be able to show her that he moved, on the firm ground of the truth. His acknowledgment of obligation was far from unimportant, but she could find in his grasp of the real itself a kind of ominous intimation. The intimation appeared to peep at her even out of his next word, lightly as he produced it.

"Isn't it rather as if we had, Charlotte and I, for bringing us together, a benefactor in common?" And the effect, for his interlocutress, was still further to be deepened. "I somehow feel, half the time, as if he were her father-in-law too. It's as if he had saved us both — which is a fact in our lives, or at any rate in our hearts, to make of itself a link. Don't you remember" — he kept it up— "how, the day she suddenly turned up for you, just before my wedding, we so frankly and funnily talked, in her presence, of the advisability, for her, of some good marriage?" And then as his friend's face, in her extremity, quite again as with Charlotte, but continued to fly the black flag of general repudiation: "Well, we really began then, as it seems to me, the work of placing her where she is. We were wholly right — and so was she. That it was exactly the thing is shown by its success. We recommended a good marriage at almost any price, so to speak, and, taking us at our word, she has made the very best. That was really what we meant, wasn't it? Only — what she has got — something thoroughly good. It would be difficult, it seems to me, for her to have anything better — once you allow her the way it's to be taken. Of course if you don't allow her that the case is different. Her offset is a certain decent freedom — which, I judge, she'll be quite contented with. You may say that will be very good of her, but she strikes me as perfectly humble about it. She proposes neither to claim it nor to use it with any sort of retentissement. She would enjoy it, I think, quite as quietly as it might be given. The 'boat,' you see" — the Prince explained it no less considerately and lucidly— "is a good deal tied up at the dock, or anchored, if you like, out in the stream. I have to jump out from time to time to stretch my legs, and you'll probably perceive, if you give it your attention, that Charlotte really can't help occasionally doing the same. It isn't even a question, sometimes, of one's getting to the dock — one has to take a header and splash about in the water. Call our having remained here together to-night, call the accident of my having put them, put our illustrious friends there, on my companion's track — for I grant you this as a practical result of our combination — call the whole thing one of the harmless little plunges off the deck, inevitable for each of us. Why not take them, when they occur, as inevitable — and, above all, as not endangering life or limb? We shan't drown, we shan't sink — at least I can answer for myself. Mrs. Verver too, moreover — do her the justice — visibly knows how to swim."

He could easily go on, for she didn't interrupt him; Fanny felt now that she wouldn't have interrupted him for the world. She found his eloquence precious; there was not a drop of it that she didn't, in a manner, catch, as it came, for immediate bottling, for future preservation. The crystal flask of her innermost attention really received it on the spot, and she had even already the vision of how, in the snug laboratory of her afterthought, she should be able chemically to analyse it. There were moments, positively, still beyond this, when, with the meeting of their eyes, something as yet unnamable came out for her in his look, when something strange and subtle and at variance with his words, something that GAVE THEM AWAY, glimmered deep down, as an appeal, almost an incredible one, to her finer comprehension. What, inconceivably, was it like? Wasn't it, however gross, such a rendering of anything so occult, fairly like a quintessential wink, a hint of the possibility of their REALLY treating their subject — of course on some better occasion — and thereby, as well, finding it much more interesting? If this far red spark, which might have been figured by her mind as the head-light of an approaching train seen through the length of a tunnel, was not, on her side, an ignis fatuus, a mere subjective phenomenon, it twinkled there at the direct expense of what the Prince was inviting her to understand. Meanwhile too, however, and unmistakably, the real treatment of their subject did, at a given moment, sound. This was when he proceeded, with just the same perfect possession of his thought — on the manner of which he couldn't have improved — to complete his successful simile by another, in fact by just the supreme touch, the touch for which it had till now been waiting. "For Mrs. Verver to be known to people so intensely and exclusively as her husband's wife, something is wanted that, you know, they haven't exactly got. He should manage to be known — or at least to be seen — a little more as his wife's husband. You surely must by this time have seen for yourself that he has his own habits and his own ways, and that he makes, more and more — as of course he has a perfect right to do — his own discriminations. He's so perfect, so ideal a father, and, doubtless largely by that very fact, a generous, a comfortable, an admirable father-in-law, that I should really feel it base to avail myself of any standpoint whatever to criticise him. To YOU, nevertheless, I may make just one remark; for you're not stupid — you always understand so blessedly

what one means."

He paused an instant, as if even this one remark might be difficult for him should she give no sign of encouraging him to produce it. Nothing would have induced her, however, to encourage him; she was now conscious of having never in her life stood so still or sat, inwardly, as it were, so tight; she felt like the horse of the adage, brought — and brought by her own fault — to the water, but strong, for the occasion, in the one fact that she couldn't be forced to drink. Invited, in other words, to understand, she held her breath for fear of showing she did, and this for the excellent reason that she was at last fairly afraid to. It was sharp for her, at the same time, that she was certain, in advance, of his remark; that she heard it before it had sounded, that she already tasted, in fine, the bitterness it would have for her special sensibility. But her companion, from an inward and different need of his own, was presently not deterred by her silence. "What I really don't see is why, from his own point of view — given, that is, his conditions, so fortunate as they stood — he should have wished to marry at all." There it was then — exactly what she knew would come, and exactly, for reasons that seemed now to thump at her heart, as distressing to her. Yet she was resolved, meanwhile, not to suffer, as they used to say of the martyrs, then and there; not to suffer, odiously, helplessly, in public — which could be prevented but by her breaking off, with whatever inconsequence; by her treating their discussion as ended and getting away. She suddenly wanted to go home much as she had wanted, an hour or two before, to come. She wanted to leave well behind her both her question and the couple in whom it had, abruptly, taken such vivid form — but it was dreadful to have the appearance of disconcerted flight. Discussion had of itself, to her sense, become danger — such light, as from open crevices, it let in; and the overt recognition of danger was worse than anything else. The worst in fact came while she was thinking how she could retreat and still not overtly recognise. Her face had betrayed her trouble, and with that she was lost. "I'm afraid, however," the Prince said, "that I, for some reason, distress you — for which I beg your pardon. We've always talked so well together — it has been, from the beginning, the greatest pull for me." Nothing so much as such a tone could have quickened her collapse; she felt he had her now at his mercy, and he showed, as he went on, that he knew it. "We shall talk again, all the same, better than ever — I depend on it too much. Don't you remember what I told you, so definitely, one day before my marriage? — that, moving as I did in so many ways among new things, mysteries, conditions, expectations, assumptions different from any I had known, I looked to you, as my original sponsor, my fairy godmother, to see me through. I beg you to believe," he added, "that I look to you yet."

His very insistence had, fortunately, the next moment, affected her as bringing her help; with which, at least, she could hold up her head to speak. "Ah, you ARE through — you were through long ago. Or if you aren't you ought to be."

"Well then, if I ought to be it's all the more reason why you should continue to help me. Because, very distinctly, I assure you, I'm not. The new things or ever so many of them — are still for me new things; the mysteries and expectations and assumptions still contain an immense element that I've failed to puzzle out. As we've happened, so luckily, to find ourselves again really taking hold together, you must let me, as soon as possible, come to see you; you must give me a good, kind hour. If you refuse it me" — and he addressed himself to her continued reserve— "I shall feel that you deny, with a stony stare, your responsibility."

At this, as from a sudden shake, her reserve proved an inadequate vessel. She could bear her own, her private reference to the weight on her mind, but the touch of another hand made it too horribly press. "Oh, I deny responsibility — to YOU. So far as I ever had it I've done with it."

He had been, all the while, beautifully smiling; but she made his look, now, penetrate her again more. "As to whom then do you confess it?"

"Ah, mio caro, that's — if to anyone — my own business!"

He continued to look at her hard. "You give me up then?"

It was what Charlotte had asked her ten minutes before, and its coming from him so much in the same way shook her in her place. She was on the point of replying "Do you and she agree together for what you'll say to me?" — but she was glad afterwards to have checked herself in time, little as her actual answer had perhaps bettered it. "I think I don't know what to make of you."

"You must receive me at least," he said.

"Oh, please, not till I'm ready for you!" — and, though she found a laugh for it, she had to turn away. She had never turned away from him before, and it was quite positively for her as if she were altogether afraid of him.

XVI

Later on, when their hired brougham had, with the long vociferation that tormented her impatience, been extricated from the endless rank, she rolled into the London night, beside her husband, as into a sheltering darkness where she could muffle herself and draw breath. She had stood for the previous half-hour in a merciless glare, beaten upon, stared out of countenance, it fairly seemed to her, by intimations of her mistake. For what she was most immediately feeling was that she had, in the past, been active, for these people, to ends that were now bearing fruit and that might yet bear a larger crop. She but brooded, at first, in her corner of the carriage: it was like burying her exposed face, a face too helplessly exposed, in the cool lap of the common indifference, of the dispeopled streets, of the closed shops and darkened houses seen through the window of the brougham, a world mercifully unconscious and unreproachful. It wouldn't, like the world she had just left, know sooner or later what she had done, or would know it, at least, only if the final consequence should be some quite overwhelming publicity. She fixed this possibility itself so hard, however, for a few moments, that the misery of her fear produced the next minute a reaction; and when the carriage happened, while it grazed a turn, to catch the straight shaft from the lamp of a policeman in the act of playing his inquisitive flash over an opposite house-front, she let herself wince at being thus incriminated only that she might protest, not less quickly, against mere blind terror. It had become, for the occasion, preposterously, terror — of which she must shake herself free before she could properly measure her ground. The perception of this necessity had in truth soon aided her; since she found, on trying, that, lurid as her prospect might hover there, she could none the less give it no name. The sense of seeing was strong in her, but she clutched at the comfort of not being sure of what she saw. Not to know what it would represent on a longer view was a help, in turn, to not making out that her hands were embrued; since if she had stood in the position of a producing cause she should surely be less vague about what she had produced. This, further, in its way, was a step toward reflecting that when one's connection with any matter was too indirect to be traced it might be described also as too slight to be deplored. By the time they were nearing Cadogan Place she had in fact recognised that she couldn't be as curious as she desired without arriving at some conviction of her being as innocent. But there had been a moment, in the dim desert of Eaton Square, when she broke into speech.

"It's only their defending themselves so much more than they need — it's only THAT that makes me wonder. It's their having so remarkably much to say for themselves."

Her husband had, as usual, lighted his cigar, remaining apparently as busy with it as she with her agitation. "You mean it makes you feel that you have nothing?" To which, as she made no answer, the Colonel added: "What in the world did you ever suppose was going to happen? The man's in a position in which he has nothing in life to do."

Her silence seemed to characterise this statement as superficial, and her thoughts, as always in her husband's company, pursued an independent course. He made her, when they were together, talk, but as if for some other person; who was in fact for the most part herself. Yet she addressed herself with him as she could never have done without him. "He has behaved beautifully — he did from the first. I've thought it, all along, wonderful of him; and I've more than once, when I've had a chance, told him so. Therefore, therefore — !" But it died away as she mused.

"Therefore he has a right, for a change, to kick up his heels?"

"It isn't a question, of course, however," she undivertedly went on, "of their behaving beautifully apart. It's a question of their doing as they should when together — which is another matter."

"And how do you think then," the Colonel asked with interest, "that, when together, they SHOULD do? The less they do, one would say, the better — if you see so much in it."

His wife, at this, appeared to hear him. "I don't see in it what YOU'D see. And don't, my dear," she further answered, "think it necessary to be horrid or low about them. They're the last people, really, to make anything of that sort come in right."

"I'm surely never horrid or low," he returned, "about anyone but my extravagant wife. I can do with all our friends — as I see them myself: what I can't do with is the figures you make of them. And when you take to adding your figures up — !" But he exhaled it again in smoke.

"My additions don't matter when you've not to pay the bill." With which her meditation again bore her through the air. "The great thing was that when it so suddenly came up for her he wasn't afraid. If he had

been afraid he could perfectly have prevented it. And if I had seen he was — if I hadn't seen he wasn't — so," said Mrs. Assingham, "could I. So," she declared, "WOULD I. It's perfectly true," she went on— "it was too good a thing for her, such a chance in life, not to be accepted. And I LIKED his not keeping her out of it merely from a fear of his own nature. It was so wonderful it should come to her. The only thing would have been if Charlotte herself couldn't have faced it. Then, if SHE had not had confidence, we might have talked. But she had it to any amount."

"Did you ask her how much?" Bob Assingham patiently inquired.

He had put the question with no more than his usual modest hope of reward, but he had pressed, this time, the sharpest spring of response. "Never, never — it wasn't a time to 'ask.' Asking is suggesting — and it wasn't a time to suggest. One had to make up one's mind, as quietly as possible, by what one could judge. And I judge, as I say, that Charlotte felt she could face it. For which she struck me at the time as — for so proud a creature — almost touchingly grateful. The thing I should never forgive her for would be her forgetting to whom it is her thanks have remained most due."

"That is to Mrs. Assingham?"

She said nothing for a little — there were, after all, alternatives. "Maggie herself of course — astonishing little Maggie."

"Is Maggie then astonishing too?" — and he gloomed out of his window.

His wife, on her side now, as they rolled, projected the same look. "I'm not sure that I don't begin to see more in her than — dear little person as I've always thought — I ever supposed there was. I'm not sure that, putting a good many things together, I'm not beginning to make her out rather extraordinary."

"You certainly will if you can," the Colonel resignedly remarked.

Again his companion said nothing; then again she broke out. "In fact — I do begin to feel it — Maggie's the great comfort. I'm getting hold of it. It will be SHE who'll see us through. In fact she'll have to. And she'll be able."

Touch by touch her meditation had completed it, but with a cumulative effect for her husband's general sense of her method that caused him to overflow, whimsically enough, in his corner, into an ejaculation now frequent on his lips for the relief that, especially in communion like the present, it gave him, and that Fanny had critically traced to the quaint example, the aboriginal homeliness, still so delightful, of Mr. Verver. "Oh, Lordy, Lordy!"

"If she is, however," Mrs. Assingham continued, "she'll be extraordinary enough — and that's what I'm thinking of. But I'm not indeed so very sure," she added, "of the person to whom Charlotte ought in decency to be most grateful. I mean I'm not sure if that person is even almost the incredible little idealist who has made her his wife."

"I shouldn't think you would be, love," the Colonel with some promptness responded. "Charlotte as the wife of an incredible little idealist — !" His cigar, in short, once more, could alone express it.

"Yet what is that, when one thinks, but just what she struck one as more or less persuaded that she herself was really going to be?" — this memory, for the full view, Fanny found herself also invoking.

It made her companion, in truth, slightly gape. "An incredible little idealist — Charlotte herself?"

"And she was sincere," his wife simply proceeded "she was unmistakably sincere. The question is only how much is left of it."

"And that — I see — happens to be another of the questions you can't ask her. You have to do it all," said Bob Assingham, "as if you were playing some game with its rules drawn up — though who's to come down on you if you break them I don't quite see. Or must you do it in three guesses — like forfeits on Christmas eve?" To which, as his ribaldry but dropped from her, he further added: "How much of anything will have to be left for you to be able to go on with it?"

"I shall go on," Fanny Assingham a trifle grimly declared, "while there's a scrap as big as your nail. But we're not yet, luckily, reduced only to that." She had another pause, holding the while the thread of that larger perception into which her view of Mrs. Verver's obligation to Maggie had suddenly expanded. "Even if her debt was not to the others — even then it ought to be quite sufficiently to the Prince himself to keep her straight. For what, really, did the Prince do," she asked herself, "but generously trust her? What did he do but take it from her that if she felt herself willing it was because she felt herself strong? That creates for her, upon my word," Mrs. Assingham pursued, "a duty of considering him, of honourably repaying his trust, which — well, which she'll be really a fiend if she doesn't make the law of her conduct. I mean of course his trust that

she wouldn't interfere with him — expressed by his holding himself quiet at the critical time."

The brougham was nearing home, and it was perhaps this sense of ebbing opportunity that caused the Colonel's next meditation to flower in a fashion almost surprising to his wife. They were united, for the most part, but by his exhausted patience; so that indulgent despair was generally, at the best, his note. He at present, however, actually compromised with his despair to the extent of practically admitting that he had followed her steps. He literally asked, in short, an intelligent, well nigh a sympathising, question. "Gratitude to the Prince for not having put a spoke in her wheel — that, you mean, should, taking it in the right way, be precisely the ballast of her boat?"

"Taking it in the right way." Fanny, catching at this gleam, emphasised the proviso.

"But doesn't it rather depend on what she may most feel to BE the right way?"

"No — it depends on nothing. Because there's only one way — for duty or delicacy."

"Oh — delicacy!" Bob Assingham rather crudely murmured.

"I mean the highest kind — moral. Charlotte's perfectly capable of appreciating that. By every dictate of moral delicacy she must let him alone."

"Then you've made up your mind it's all poor Charlotte?" he asked with an effect of abruptness.

The effect, whether intended or not, reached her — brought her face short round. It was a touch at which she again lost her balance, at which, somehow, the bottom dropped out of her recovered comfort. "Then you've made up yours differently? It really struck you that there IS something?"

The movement itself, apparently, made him once more stand off. He had felt on his nearer approach the high temperature of the question. "Perhaps that's just what she's doing: showing him how much she's letting him alone — pointing it out to him from day to day."

"Did she point it out by waiting for him to-night on the stair-case in the manner you described to me?"

"I really, my dear, described to you a manner?" the Colonel, clearly, from want of habit, scarce recognised himself in the imputation.

"Yes — for once in a way; in those few words we had after you had watched them come up you told me something of what you had seen. You didn't tell me very much — THAT you couldn't for your life; but I saw for myself that, strange to say, you had received your impression, and I felt therefore that there must indeed have been something out of the way for you so to betray it." She was fully upon him now, and she confronted him with his proved sensibility to the occasion — confronted him because of her own uneasy need to profit by it. It came over her still more than at the time, it came over her that he had been struck with something, even HE, poor dear man; and that for this to have occurred there must have been much to be struck with. She tried in fact to corner him, to pack him insistently down, in the truth of his plain vision, the very plainness of which was its value; for so recorded, she felt, none of it would escape — she should have it at hand for reference. "Come, my dear — you thought what you thought: in the presence of what you saw you couldn't resist thinking. I don't ask more of it than that. And your idea is worth, this time, quite as much as any of mine — so that you can't pretend, as usual, that mine has run away with me. I haven't caught up with you. I stay where I am. But I see," she concluded, "where you are, and I'm much obliged to you for letting me. You give me a point de repere outside myself — which is where I like it. Now I can work round you."

Their conveyance, as she spoke, stopped at their door, and it was, on the spot, another fact of value for her that her husband, though seated on the side by which they must alight, made no movement. They were in a high degree votaries of the latch-key, so that their household had gone to bed; and as they were unaccompanied by a footman the coachman waited in peace. It was so indeed that for a minute Bob Assingham waited — conscious of a reason for replying to this address otherwise than by the so obvious method of turning his back. He didn't turn his face, but he stared straight before him, and his wife had already perceived in the fact of his not moving all the proof she could desire — proof, that is, of her own contention. She knew he never cared what she said, and his neglect of his chance to show it was thereby the more eloquent. "Leave it," he at last remarked, "to THEM."

"'Leave' it — ?" She wondered.

"Let them alone. They'll manage."

"They'll manage, you mean, to do everything they want? Ah, there then you are!"

"They'll manage in their own way," the Colonel almost cryptically repeated.

It had its effect for her: quite apart from its light on the familiar phenomenon of her husband's indurated conscience, it gave her, full in her face, the particular evocation of which she had made him guilty. It was

wonderful truly, then, the evocation. “So cleverly — THAT’S your idea? — that no one will be the wiser? It’s your idea that we shall have done all that’s required of us if we simply protect them?”

The Colonel, still in his place, declined, however, to be drawn into a statement of his idea. Statements were too much like theories, in which one lost one’s way; he only knew what he said, and what he said represented the limited vibration of which his confirmed old toughness had been capable. Still, none the less, he had his point to make — for which he took another instant. But he made it, for the third time, in the same fashion. “They’ll manage in their own way.” With which he got out.

Oh yes, at this, for his companion, it had indeed its effect, and while he mounted their steps she but stared, without following him, at his opening of their door. Their hall was lighted, and as he stood in the aperture looking back at her, his tall lean figure outlined in darkness and with his crush-hat, according to his wont, worn cavalierly, rather diabolically, askew, he seemed to prolong the sinister emphasis of his meaning. In general, on these returns, he came back for her when he had prepared their entrance; so that it was now as if he were ashamed to face her in closer quarters. He looked at her across the interval, and, still in her seat, weighing his charge, she felt her whole view of everything flare up. Wasn’t it simply what had been written in the Prince’s own face BENEATH what he was saying? — didn’t it correspond with the mocking presence there that she had had her troubled glimpse of? Wasn’t, in fine, the pledge that they would “manage in their own way” the thing he had been feeling for his chance to invite her to take from him? Her husband’s tone somehow fitted Amerigo’s look — the one that had, for her, so strangely, peeped, from behind, over the shoulder of the one in front. She had not then read it — but wasn’t she reading it when she now saw in it his surmise that she was perhaps to be squared? She wasn’t to be squared, and while she heard her companion call across to her “Well, what’s the matter?” she also took time to remind herself that she had decided she couldn’t be frightened. The “matter”? — why, it was sufficiently the matter, with all this, that she felt a little sick. For it was not the Prince that she had been prepared to regard as primarily the shaky one. Shakiness in Charlotte she had, at the most, perhaps postulated — it would be, she somehow felt, more easy to deal with. Therefore if HE had come so far it was a different pair of sleeves. There was nothing to choose between them. It made her so helpless that, as the time passed without her alighting, the Colonel came back and fairly drew her forth; after which, on the pavement, under the street-lamp, their very silence might have been the mark of something grave — their silence eked out for her by his giving her his arm and their then crawling up their steps quite mildly and unitedly together, like some old Darby and Joan who have had a disappointment. It almost resembled a return from a funeral — unless indeed it resembled more the hushed approach to a house of mourning. What indeed had she come home for but to bury, as decently as possible, her mistake?

XVII

It appeared thus that they might enjoy together extraordinary freedom, the two friends, from the moment they should understand their position aright. With the Prince himself, from an early stage, not unnaturally, Charlotte had made a great point of their so understanding it; she had found frequent occasion to describe to him this necessity, and, her resignation tempered, or her intelligence at least quickened, by irrepressible irony, she applied at different times different names to the propriety of their case. The wonderful thing was that her sense of propriety had been, from the first, especially alive about it. There were hours when she spoke of their taking refuge in what she called the commonest tact — as if this principle alone would suffice to light their way; there were others when it might have seemed, to listen to her, that their course would demand of them the most anxious study and the most independent, not to say original, interpretation of signs. She talked now as if it were indicated, at every turn, by finger-posts of almost ridiculous prominence; she talked again as if it lurked in devious ways and were to be tracked through bush and briar; and she even, on occasion, delivered herself in the sense that, as their situation was unprecedented, so their heaven was without stars. "'Do'?" she once had echoed to him as the upshot of passages covertly, though briefly, occurring between them on her return from the visit to America that had immediately succeeded her marriage, determined for her by this event as promptly as an excursion of the like strange order had been prescribed in his own case. "Isn't the immense, the really quite matchless beauty of our position that we have to 'do' nothing in life at all? — nothing except the usual, necessary, everyday thing which consists in one's not being more of a fool than one can help. That's all — but that's as true for one time as for another. There has been plenty of 'doing,' and there will doubtless be plenty still; but it's all theirs, every inch of it; it's all a matter of what they've done TO us." And she showed how the question had therefore been only of their taking everything as everything came, and all as quietly as might be. Nothing stranger surely had ever happened to a conscientious, a well-meaning, a perfectly passive pair: no more extraordinary decree had ever been launched against such victims than this of forcing them against their will into a relation of mutual close contact that they had done everything to avoid.

She was to remember not a little, meanwhile, the particular prolonged silent look with which the Prince had met her allusion to these primary efforts at escape. She was inwardly to dwell on the element of the unuttered that her tone had caused to play up into his irresistible eyes; and this because she considered with pride and joy that she had, on the spot, disposed of the doubt, the question, the challenge, or whatever else might have been, that such a look could convey. He had been sufficiently off his guard to show some little wonder as to their having plotted so very hard against their destiny, and she knew well enough, of course, what, in this connection, was at the bottom of his thought, and what would have sounded out more or less if he had not happily saved himself from words. All men were brutes enough to catch when they might at such chances for dissent — for all the good it really did them; but the Prince's distinction was in being one of the few who could check himself before acting on the impulse. This, obviously, was what counted in a man as delicacy. If her friend had blurted or bungled he would have said, in his simplicity, "Did we do 'everything to avoid' it when we faced your remarkable marriage?" — quite handsomely of course using the plural, taking his share of the case, by way of a tribute of memory to the telegram she had received from him in Paris after Mr. Verver had despatched to Rome the news of their engagement. That telegram, that acceptance of the prospect proposed to them — an acceptance quite other than perfunctory — she had never destroyed; though reserved for no eyes but her own it was still carefully reserved. She kept it in a safe place — from which, very privately, she sometimes took it out to read it over. "A la guerre comme a la guerre then" — it had been couched in the French tongue. "We must lead our lives as we see them; but I am charmed with your courage and almost surprised at my own." The message had remained ambiguous; she had read it in more lights than one; it might mean that even without her his career was up-hill work for him, a daily fighting-matter on behalf of a good appearance, and that thus, if they were to become neighbours again, the event would compel him to live still more under arms. It might mean on the other hand that he found he was happy enough, and that accordingly, so far as she might imagine herself a danger, she was to think of him as prepared in advance, as really seasoned and secure. On his arrival in Paris with his wife, none the less, she had asked for no explanation, just as he himself had not asked if the document were still in her possession. Such an inquiry, everything implied, was beneath him — just as it was beneath herself to mention to him, uninvited, that she

had instantly offered, and in perfect honesty, to show the telegram to Mr. Verver, and that if this companion had but said the word she would immediately have put it before him. She had thereby forborne to call his attention to her consciousness that such an exposure would, in all probability, straightway have dished her marriage; that all her future had in fact, for the moment, hung by the single hair of Mr. Verver's delicacy (as she supposed they must call it); and that her position, in the matter of responsibility, was therefore inattackably straight.

For the Prince himself, meanwhile, time, in its measured allowance, had originally much helped him — helped him in the sense of there not being enough of it to trip him up; in spite of which it was just this accessory element that seemed, at present, with wonders of patience, to lie in wait. Time had begotten at first, more than anything else, separations, delays and intervals; but it was troublesomely less of an aid from the moment it began so to abound that he had to meet the question of what to do with it. Less of it was required for the state of being married than he had, on the whole, expected; less, strangely, for the state of being married even as he was married. And there was a logic in the matter, he knew; a logic that but gave this truth a sort of solidity of evidence. Mr. Verver, decidedly, helped him with it — with his wedded condition; helped him really so much that it made all the difference. In the degree in which he rendered it the service on Mr. Verver's part was remarkable — as indeed what service, from the first of their meeting, had not been? He was living, he had been living these four or five years, on Mr. Verver's services: a truth scarcely less plain if he dealt with them, for appreciation, one by one, than if he poured them all together into the general pot of his gratitude and let the thing simmer to a nourishing broth. To the latter way with them he was undoubtedly most disposed; yet he would even thus, on occasion, pick out a piece to taste on its own merits. Wondrous at such hours could seem the savour of the particular "treat," at his father-in-law's expense, that he more and more struck himself as enjoying. He had needed months and months to arrive at a full appreciation — he couldn't originally have given offhand a name to his deepest obligation; but by the time the name had flowered in his mind he was practically living at the ease guaranteed him. Mr. Verver then, in a word, took care of his relation to Maggie, as he took care, and apparently always would, of everything else. He relieved him of all anxiety about his married life in the same manner in which he relieved him on the score of his bank-account. And as he performed the latter office by communicating with the bankers, so the former sprang as directly from his good understanding with his daughter. This understanding had, wonderfully — THAT was in high evidence — the same deep intimacy as the commercial, the financial association founded, far down, on a community of interest. And the correspondence, for the Prince, carried itself out in identities of character the vision of which, fortunately, rather tended to amuse than to — as might have happened — irritate him. Those people — and his free synthesis lumped together capitalists and bankers, retired men of business, illustrious collectors, American fathers-in-law, American fathers, little American daughters, little American wives — those people were of the same large lucky group, as one might say; they were all, at least, of the same general species and had the same general instincts; they hung together, they passed each other the word, they spoke each other's language, they did each other "turns." In this last connection it of course came up for our young man at a given moment that Maggie's relation with HIM was also, on the perceived basis, taken care of. Which was in fact the real upshot of the matter. It was a "funny" situation — that is it was funny just as it stood. Their married life was in question, but the solution was, not less strikingly, before them. It was all right for himself, because Mr. Verver worked it so for Maggie's comfort; and it was all right for Maggie, because he worked it so for her husband's.

The fact that time, however, was not, as we have said, wholly on the Prince's side might have shown for particularly true one dark day on which, by an odd but not unprecedented chance, the reflections just noted offered themselves as his main recreation. They alone, it appeared, had been appointed to fill the hours for him, and even to fill the great square house in Portland Place, where the scale of one of the smaller saloons fitted them but loosely. He had looked into this room on the chance that he might find the Princess at tea; but though the fireside service of the repast was shiningly present the mistress of the table was not, and he had waited for her, if waiting it could be called, while he measured again and again the stretch of polished floor. He could have named to himself no pressing reason for seeing her at this moment, and her not coming in, as the half-hour elapsed, became in fact quite positively, however perversely, the circumstance that kept him on the spot. Just there, he might have been feeling, just there he could best take his note. This observation was certainly by itself meagre amusement for a dreary little crisis; but his walk to and fro, and in particular his repeated pause at one of the high front windows, gave each of the ebbing minutes, none the less, after a time,

a little more of the quality of a quickened throb of the spirit. These throbs scarce expressed, however, the impatience of desire, any more than they stood for sharp disappointment: the series together resembled perhaps more than anything else those fine waves of clearness through which, for a watcher of the east, dawn at last trembles into rosy day. The illumination indeed was all for the mind, the prospect revealed by it a mere immensity of the world of thought; the material outlook was all the while a different matter. The March afternoon, judged at the window, had blundered back into autumn; it had been raining for hours, and the colour of the rain, the colour of the air, of the mud, of the opposite houses, of life altogether, in so grim a joke, so idiotic a masquerade, was an unutterable dirty brown. There was at first even, for the young man, no faint flush in the fact of the direction taken, while he happened to look out, by a slow-jogging four-wheeled cab which, awkwardly deflecting from the middle course, at the apparent instance of a person within, began to make for the left-hand pavement and so at last, under further instructions, floundered to a full stop before the Prince's windows. The person within, alighting with an easier motion, proved to be a lady who left the vehicle to wait and, putting up no umbrella, quickly crossed the wet interval that separated her from the house. She but flitted and disappeared; yet the Prince, from his standpoint, had had time to recognise her, and the recognition kept him for some minutes motionless.

Charlotte Stant, at such an hour, in a shabby four-wheeler and a waterproof, Charlotte Stant turning up for him at the very climax of his special inner vision, was an apparition charged with a congruity at which he stared almost as if it had been a violence. The effect of her coming to see him, him only, had, while he stood waiting, a singular intensity — though after some minutes had passed the certainty of this began to drop. Perhaps she had NOT come, or had come only for Maggie; perhaps, on learning below that the Princess had not returned, she was merely leaving a message, writing a word on a card. He should see, at any rate; and meanwhile, controlling himself, would do nothing. This thought of not interfering took on a sudden force for him; she would doubtless hear he was at home, but he would let her visit to him be all of her own choosing. And his view of a reason for leaving her free was the more remarkable that, though taking no step, he yet intensely hoped. The harmony of her breaking into sight while the superficial conditions were so against her was a harmony with conditions that were far from superficial and that gave, for his imagination, an extraordinary value to her presence. The value deepened strangely, moreover, with the rigour of his own attitude — with the fact too that, listening hard, he neither heard the house-door close again nor saw her go back to her cab; and it had risen to a climax by the time he had become aware, with his quickened sense, that she had followed the butler up to the landing from which his room opened. If anything could further then have added to it, the renewed pause outside, as if she had said to the man "Wait a moment!" would have constituted this touch. Yet when the man had shown her in, had advanced to the tea-table to light the lamp under the kettle and had then busied himself, all deliberately, with the fire, she made it easy for her host to drop straight from any height of tension and to meet her, provisionally, on the question of Maggie. While the butler remained it was Maggie that she had come to see and Maggie that — in spite of this attendant's high blankness on the subject of all possibilities on that lady's part — she would cheerfully, by the fire, wait for. As soon as they were alone together, however, she mounted, as with the whizz and the red light of a rocket, from the form to the fact, saying straight out, as she stood and looked at him: "What else, my dear, what in the world else can we do?"

It was as if he then knew, on the spot, why he had been feeling, for hours, as he had felt — as if he in fact knew, within the minute, things he had not known even while she was panting, as from the effect of the staircase, at the door of the room. He knew at the same time, none the less, that she knew still more than he — in the sense, that is, of all the signs and portents that might count for them; and his vision of alternative — she could scarce say what to call them, solutions, satisfactions — opened out, altogether, with this tangible truth of her attitude by the chimney-place, the way she looked at him as through the gained advantage of it; her right hand resting on the marble and her left keeping her skirt from the fire while she held out a foot to dry. He couldn't have told what particular links and gaps had at the end of a few minutes found themselves renewed and bridged; for he remembered no occasion, in Rome, from which the picture could have been so exactly copied. He remembered, that is, none of her coming to see him in the rain while a muddy four-wheeler waited, and while, though having left her waterproof downstairs, she was yet invested with the odd eloquence — the positive picturesqueness, yes, given all the rest of the matter — of a dull dress and a black Bowdlerised hat that seemed to make a point of insisting on their time of life and their moral intention, the hat's and the frock's own, as well as on the irony of indifference to them practically playing in her so

handsome rain-freshened face. The sense of the past revived for him nevertheless as it had not yet done: it made that other time somehow meet the future close, interlocking with it, before his watching eyes, as in a long embrace of arms and lips, and so handling and hustling the present that this poor quantity scarce retained substance enough, scarce remained sufficiently THERE, to be wounded or shocked.

What had happened, in short, was that Charlotte and he had, by a single turn of the wrist of fate— "led up" to indeed, no doubt, by steps and stages that conscious computation had missed — been placed face to face in a freedom that partook, extraordinarily, of ideal perfection, since the magic web had spun itself without their toil, almost without their touch. Above all, on this occasion, once more, there sounded through their safety, as an undertone, the very voice he had listened to on the eve of his marriage with such another sort of unrest. Dimly, again and again, from that period on, he had seemed to hear it tell him why it kept recurring; but it phrased the large music now in a way that filled the room. The reason was — into which he had lived, quite intimately, by the end of a quarter-of-an-hour — that just this truth of their safety offered it now a kind of unexampled receptacle, letting it spread and spread, but at the same time elastically enclosing it, banking it in, for softness, as with billows of eiderdown. On that morning; in the Park there had been, however dissimulated, doubt and danger, whereas the tale this afternoon was taken up with a highly emphasised confidence. The emphasis, for their general comfort, was what Charlotte had come to apply; inasmuch as, though it was not what she definitely began with, it had soon irrepressibly shaped itself. It was the meaning of the question she had put to him as soon as they were alone — even though indeed, as from not quite understanding, he had not then directly replied; it was the meaning of everything else, down to the conscious quaintness of her ricketty "growler" and the conscious humility of her dress. It had helped him a little, the question of these eccentricities, to let her immediate appeal pass without an answer. He could ask her instead what had become of her carriage and why, above all, she was not using it in such weather.

"It's just because of the weather," she explained. "It's my little idea. It makes me feel as I used to — when I could do as I liked."

XVIII

This came out so straight that he saw at once how much truth it expressed; yet it was truth that still a little puzzled him. “But did you ever like knocking about in such discomfort?”

“It seems to me now that I then liked everything. It’s the charm, at any rate,” she said from her place at the fire, “of trying again the old feelings. They come back — they come back. Everything,” she went on, “comes back. Besides,” she wound up, “you know for yourself.”

He stood near her, his hands in his pockets; but not looking at her, looking hard at the tea-table. “Ah, I haven’t your courage. Moreover,” he laughed, “it seems to me that, so far as that goes, I do live in hansoms. But you must awfully want your tea,” he quickly added; “so let me give you a good stiff cup.”

He busied himself with this care, and she sat down, on his pushing up a low seat, where she had been standing; so that, while she talked, he could bring her what she further desired. He moved to and fro before her, he helped himself; and her visit, as the moments passed, had more and more the effect of a signal communication that she had come, all responsibly and deliberately, as on the clear show of the clock-face of their situation, to make. The whole demonstration, none the less, presented itself as taking place at a very high level of debate — in the cool upper air of the finer discrimination, the deeper sincerity, the larger philosophy. No matter what were the facts invoked and arrayed, it was only a question, as yet, of their seeing their way together: to which indeed, exactly, the present occasion appeared to have so much to contribute. “It’s not that you haven’t my courage,” Charlotte said, “but that you haven’t, I rather think, my imagination. Unless indeed it should turn out after all,” she added, “that you haven’t even my intelligence. However, I shall not be afraid of that till you’ve given me more proof.” And she made again, but more clearly, her point of a moment before. “You knew, besides, you knew to-day, I would come. And if you knew that you know everything.” So she pursued, and if he didn’t meanwhile, if he didn’t even at this, take her up, it might be that she was so positively fitting him again with the fair face of temporising kindness that he had given her, to keep her eyes on, at the other important juncture, and the sense of which she might ever since have been carrying about with her like a precious medal — not exactly blessed by the Pope suspended round her neck. She had come back, however this might be, to her immediate account of herself, and no mention of their great previous passage was to rise to the lips of either. “Above all,” she said, “there has been the personal romance of it.”

“Of tea with me over the fire? Ah, so far as that goes I don’t think even my intelligence fails me.”

“Oh, it’s further than that goes; and if I’ve had a better day than you it’s perhaps, when I come to think of it, that I AM braver. You bore yourself, you see. But I don’t. I don’t, I don’t,” she repeated.

“It’s precisely boring one’s self without relief,” he protested, “that takes courage.”

“Passive then — not active. My romance is that, if you want to know, I’ve been all day on the town. Literally on the town — isn’t that what they call it? I know how it feels.” After which, as if breaking off, “And you, have you never been out?” she asked.

He still stood there with his hands in his pockets. “What should I have gone out for?”

“Oh, what should people in our case do anything for? But you’re wonderful, all of YOU — you know how to live. We’re clumsy brutes, we other’s, beside you — we must always be ‘doing’ something. However,” Charlotte pursued, “if you had gone out you might have missed the chance of me — which I’m sure, though you won’t confess it, was what you didn’t want; and might have missed, above all, the satisfaction that, look blank about it as you will, I’ve come to congratulate you on. That’s really what I can at last do. You can’t not know at least, on such a day as this — you can’t not know,” she said, “where you are.” She waited as for him either to grant that he knew or to pretend that he didn’t; but he only drew a long deep breath which came out like a moan of impatience. It brushed aside the question of where he was or what he knew; it seemed to keep the ground clear for the question of his visitor herself, that of Charlotte Verver exactly as she sat there. So, for some moments, with their long look, they but treated the matter in silence; with the effect indeed, by the end of the time, of having considerably brought it on. This was sufficiently marked in what Charlotte next said. “There it all is — extraordinary beyond words. It makes such a relation for us as, I verily believe, was never before in the world thrust upon two well-meaning creatures. Haven’t we therefore to take things as we find them?” She put the question still more directly than that of a moment before, but to this one, as well, he returned no immediate answer. Noticing only that she had finished her tea, he relieved her of her cup, carried it back to the table, asked her what more she would have; and then, on her “Nothing, thanks,” returned to the

fire and restored a displaced log to position by a small but almost too effectual kick. She had meanwhile got up again, and it was on her feet that she repeated the words she had first frankly spoken. “What else can we do, what in all the world else?”

He took them up, however, no more than at first. “Where then have you been?” he asked as from mere interest in her adventure.

“Everywhere I could think of — except to see people. I didn’t want people — I wanted too much to think. But I’ve been back at intervals — three times; and then come away again. My cabman must think me crazy — it’s very amusing; I shall owe him, when we come to settle, more money than he has ever seen. I’ve been, my dear,” she went on, “to the British Museum — which, you know, I always adore. And I’ve been to the National Gallery, and to a dozen old booksellers’, coming across treasures, and I’ve lunched, on some strange nastiness, at a cookshop in Holborn. I wanted to go to the Tower, but it was too far — my old man urged that; and I would have gone to the Zoo if it hadn’t been too wet — which he also begged me to observe. But you wouldn’t believe — I did put in St. Paul’s. Such days,” she wound up, “are expensive; for, besides the cab, I’ve bought quantities of books.” She immediately passed, at any rate, to another point: “I can’t help wondering when you must last have laid eyes on them.” And then as it had apparently for her companion an effect of abruptness: “Maggie, I mean, and the child. For I suppose you know he’s with her.”

“Oh yes, I know he’s with her. I saw them this morning.”

“And did they then announce their programme?”

“She told me she was taking him, as usual, da nonno.”

“And for the whole day?”

He hesitated, but it was as if his attitude had slowly shifted.

“She didn’t say. And I didn’t ask.”

“Well,” she went on, “it can’t have been later than half-past ten — I mean when you saw them. They had got to Eaton Square before eleven. You know we don’t formally breakfast, Adam and I; we have tea in our rooms — at least I have; but luncheon is early, and I saw my husband, this morning, by twelve; he was showing the child a picture-book. Maggie had been there with them, had left them settled together. Then she had gone out — taking the carriage for something he had been intending but that she offered to do instead.”

The Prince appeared to confess, at this, to his interest.

“Taking, you mean, YOUR carriage?”

“I don’t know which, and it doesn’t matter. It’s not a question,” she smiled, “of a carriage the more or the less. It’s not a question even, if you come to that, of a cab. It’s so beautiful,” she said, “that it’s not a question of anything vulgar or horrid.” Which she gave him time to agree about; and though he was silent it was, rather remarkably, as if he fell in. “I went out — I wanted to. I had my idea. It seemed to me important. It has BEEN — it IS important. I know as I haven’t known before the way they feel. I couldn’t in any other way have made so sure of it.”

“They feel a confidence,” the Prince observed.

He had indeed said it for her. “They feel a confidence.” And she proceeded, with lucidity, to the fuller illustration of it; speaking again of the three different moments that, in the course of her wild ramble, had witnessed her return — for curiosity, and even really a little from anxiety — to Eaton Square. She was possessed of a latch-key, rarely used: it had always irritated Adam — one of the few things that did — to find servants standing up so inhumanly straight when they came home, in the small hours, after parties. “So I had but to slip in, each time, with my cab at the door, and make out for myself, without their knowing it, that Maggie was still there. I came, I went — without their so much as dreaming. What do they really suppose,” she asked, “becomes of one? — not so much sentimentally or morally, so to call it, and since that doesn’t matter; but even just physically, materially, as a mere wandering woman: as a decent harmless wife, after all; as the best stepmother, after all, that really ever was; or at the least simply as a maitresse de maison not quite without a conscience. They must even in their odd way,” she declared, “have SOME idea.”

“Oh, they’ve a great deal of idea,” said the Prince. And nothing was easier than to mention the quantity. “They think so much of us. They think in particular so much of you.”

“Ah, don’t put it all on ‘me’!” she smiled.

But he was putting it now where she had admirably prepared the place. “It’s a matter of your known character.”

“Ah, thank you for ‘known’!” she still smiled.

"It's a matter of your wonderful cleverness and wonderful charm. It's a matter of what those things have done for you in the world — I mean in THIS world and this place. You're a Personage for them — and Personages do go and come."

"Oh no, my dear; there you're quite wrong." And she laughed now in the happier light they had diffused. "That's exactly what Personages don't do: they live in state and under constant consideration; they haven't latch-keys, but drums and trumpets announce them; and when they go out in growlers it makes a greater noise still. It's you, caro mio," she said, "who, so far as that goes, are the Personage."

"Ah," he in turn protested, "don't put it all on me! What, at any rate, when you get home," he added, "shall you say that you've been doing?"

"I shall say, beautifully, that I've been here."

"All day?"

"Yes — all day. Keeping you company in your solitude. How can we understand anything," she went on, "without really seeing that this is what they must like to think I do for you? — just as, quite as comfortably, you do it for me. The thing is for us to learn to take them as they are."

He considered this a while, in his restless way, but with his eyes not turning from her; after which, rather disconnectedly, though very vehemently, he brought out: "How can I not feel more than anything else how they adore together my boy?" And then, further, as if, slightly disconcerted, she had nothing to meet this and he quickly perceived the effect: "They would have done the same for one of yours."

"Ah, if I could have had one — ! I hoped and I believed," said Charlotte, "that that would happen. It would have been better. It would have made perhaps some difference. He thought so too, poor duck — that it might have been. I'm sure he hoped and intended so. It's not, at any rate," she went on, "my fault. There it is." She had uttered these statements, one by one, gravely, sadly and responsibly, owing it to her friend to be clear. She paused briefly, but, as if once for all, she made her clearness complete. "And now I'm too sure. It will never be."

He waited for a moment. "Never?"

"Never." They treated the matter not exactly with solemnity, but with a certain decency, even perhaps urgency, of distinctness. "It would probably have been better," Charlotte added. "But things turn out — ! And it leaves us" — she made the point— "more alone."

He seemed to wonder. "It leaves you more alone."

"Oh," she again returned, "don't put it all on me! Maggie would have given herself to his child, I'm sure, scarcely less than he gives himself to yours. It would have taken more than any child of mine," she explained — "it would have taken more than ten children of mine, could I have had them — to keep our sposi apart." She smiled as for the breadth of the image, but, as he seemed to take it, in spite of this, for important, she then spoke gravely enough. "It's as strange as you like, but we're immensely alone." He kept vaguely moving, but there were moments when, again, with an awkward ease and his hands in his pockets, he was more directly before her. He stood there at these last words, which had the effect of making him for a little throw back his head and, as thinking something out, stare up at the ceiling. "What will you say," she meanwhile asked, "that you've been doing?" This brought his consciousness and his eyes back to her, and she pointed her question. "I mean when she comes in — for I suppose she WILL, some time, come in. It seems to me we must say the same thing."

Well, he thought again. "Yet I can scarce pretend to have had what I haven't."

"Ah, WHAT haven't you had? — what aren't you having?"

Her question rang out as they lingered face to face, and he still took it, before he answered, from her eyes. "We must at least then, not to be absurd together, do the same thing. We must act, it would really seem, in concert."

"It would really seem!" Her eyebrows, her shoulders went up, quite in gaiety, as for the relief this brought her. "It's all in the world I pretend. We must act in concert. Heaven knows," she said, "THEY do!"

So it was that he evidently saw and that, by his admission, the case, could fairly be put. But what he evidently saw appeared to come over him, at the same time, as too much for him, so that he fell back suddenly to ground where she was not awaiting him. "The difficulty is, and will always be, that I don't understand them. I didn't at first, but I thought I should learn to. That was what I hoped, and it appeared then that Fanny Assingham might help me."

"Oh, Fanny Assingham!" said Charlotte Verver.

He stared a moment at her tone. “She would do anything for us.”

To which Charlotte at first said nothing — as if from the sense of too much. Then, indulgently enough, she shook her head. “We’re beyond her.”

He thought a moment — as of where this placed them. “She’d do anything then for THEM.”

“Well, so would we — so that doesn’t help us. She has broken down. She doesn’t understand us. And really, my dear,” Charlotte added, “Fanny Assingham doesn’t matter.”

He wondered again. “Unless as taking care of THEM.”

“Ah,” Charlotte instantly said, “isn’t it for us, only, to do that?” She spoke as with a flare of pride for their privilege and their duty. “I think we want no one’s aid.”

She spoke indeed with a nobleness not the less effective for coming in so oddly; with a sincerity visible even through the complicated twist by which any effort to protect the father and the daughter seemed necessarily conditioned for them. It moved him, in any case, as if some spring of his own, a weaker one, had suddenly been broken by it. These things, all the while, the privilege, the duty, the opportunity, had been the substance of his own vision; they formed the note he had been keeping back to show her that he was not, in their so special situation, without a responsible view. A conception that he could name, and could act on, was something that now, at last, not to be too eminent a fool, he was required by all the graces to produce, and the luminous idea she had herself uttered would have been his expression of it. She had anticipated him, but, as her expression left, for positive beauty, nothing to be desired, he felt rather righted than wronged. A large response, as he looked at her, came into his face, a light of excited perception all his own, in the glory of which — as it almost might be called — what he gave her back had the value of what she had, given him. “They’re extraordinarily happy.”

Oh, Charlotte’s measure of it was only too full. “Beatifically.”

“That’s the great thing,” he went on; “so that it doesn’t matter, really, that one doesn’t understand. Besides, you do — enough.”

“I understand my husband perhaps,” she after an instant conceded. “I don’t understand your wife.”

“You’re of the same race, at any rate — more or less; of the same general tradition and education, of the same moral paste. There are things you have in common with them. But I, on my side, as I’ve gone on trying to see if I haven’t some of these things too — I, on my side, have more and more failed. There seem at last to be none worth mentioning. I can’t help seeing it — I’m decidedly too different.”

“Yet you’re not” — Charlotte made the important point— “too different from ME.”

“I don’t know — as we’re not married. That brings things out. Perhaps if we were,” he said, “you WOULD find some abyss of divergence.”

“Since it depends on that then,” she smiled, “I’m safe — as you are anyhow. Moreover, as one has so often had occasion to feel, and even to remark, they’re very, very simple. That makes,” she added, “a difficulty for belief; but when once one has taken it in it makes less difficulty for action. I HAVE at last, for myself, I think, taken it in. I’m not afraid.”

He wondered a moment. “Not afraid of what?”

“Well, generally, of some beastly mistake. Especially of any mistake founded on one’s idea of their difference. For that idea,” Charlotte developed, “positively makes one so tender.”

“Ah, but rather!”

“Well then, there it is. I can’t put myself into Maggie’s skin — I can’t, as I say. It’s not my fit — I shouldn’t be able, as I see it, to breathe in it. But I can feel that I’d do anything — to shield it from a bruise. Tender as I am for her too,” she went on, “I think I’m still more so for my husband. HE’S in truth of a sweet simplicity — !”

The Prince turned over a while the sweet simplicity of Mr. Verver. “Well, I don’t know that I can choose. At night all cats are grey. I only see how, for so many reasons, we ought to stand toward them — and how, to do ourselves justice, we do. It represents for us a conscious care—”

“Of every hour, literally,” said Charlotte. She could rise to the highest measure of the facts. “And for which we must trust each other — !”

“Oh, as we trust the saints in glory. Fortunately,” the Prince hastened to add, “we can.” With which, as for the full assurance and the pledge it involved, their hands instinctively found their hands. “It’s all too wonderful.”

Firmly and gravely she kept his hand. “It’s too beautiful.”

And so for a minute they stood together, as strongly held and as closely confronted as any hour of their easier past even had seen them. They were silent at first, only facing and faced, only grasping and grasped, only meeting and met. “It’s sacred,” he said at last.

“It’s sacred,” she breathed back to him. They vowed it, gave it out and took it in, drawn, by their intensity, more closely together. Then of a sudden, through this tightened circle, as at the issue of a narrow strait into the sea beyond, everything broke up, broke down, gave way, melted and mingled. Their lips sought their lips, their pressure their response and their response their pressure; with a violence that had sighed itself the next moment to the longest and deepest of stillnesses they passionately sealed their pledge.

XIX

He had taken it from her, as we have seen, moreover, that Fanny Assingham didn't now matter — the "now" he had even himself supplied, as no more than fair to his sense of various earlier stages; and, though his assent remained scarce more than tacit, his behaviour, for the hour, so fell into line that, for many days, he kept postponing the visit he had promised his old friend on the occasion of their talk at the Foreign Office. With regret, none the less, would he have seen it quite extinguished, that theory of their relation as attached pupil and kind instructress in which they had from the first almost equally found a convenience. It had been he, no doubt, who had most put it forward, since his need of knowledge fairly exceeded her mild pretension; but he had again and again repeated to her that he should never, without her, have been where he was, and she had not successfully concealed the pleasure it might give her to believe it, even after the question of where he was had begun to show itself as rather more closed than open to interpretation. It had never indeed, before that evening, come up as during the passage at the official party, and he had for the first time at those moments, a little disappointedly, got the impression of a certain failure, on the dear woman's part, of something he was aware of having always rather freely taken for granted in her. Of what exactly the failure consisted he would still perhaps have felt it a little harsh to try to say; and if she had in fact, as by Charlotte's observation, "broken down," the details of the collapse would be comparatively unimportant. They came to the same thing, all such collapses — the failure of courage, the failure of friendship, or the failure just simply of tact; for didn't any one of them by itself amount really to the failure of wit? — which was the last thing he had expected of her and which would be but another name for the triumph of stupidity. It had been Charlotte's remark that they were at last "beyond" her; whereas he had ever enjoyed believing that a certain easy imagination in her would keep up with him to the end. He shrank from affixing a label to Mrs. Assingham's want of faith; but when he thought, at his ease, of the way persons who were capable really entertained — or at least with any refinement — the passion of personal loyalty, he figured for them a play of fancy neither timorous nor scrupulous. So would his personal loyalty, if need be, have accepted the adventure for the good creature herself; to that definite degree that he had positively almost missed the luxury of some such call from her. That was what it all came back to again with these people among whom he was married — that one found one used one's imagination mainly for wondering how they contrived so little to appeal to it. He felt at moments as if there were never anything to do for them that was worthy — to call worthy — of the personal relation; never any charming charge to take of any confidence deeply reposed. He might vulgarly have put it that one had never to plot or to lie for them; he might humourously have put it that one had never, as by the higher conformity, to lie in wait with the dagger or to prepare, insidiously, the cup. These were the services that, by all romantic tradition, were consecrated to affection quite as much as to hate. But he could amuse himself with saying — so far as the amusement went — that they were what he had once for all turned his back on.

Fanny was meanwhile frequent, it appeared, in Eaton Square; so much he gathered from the visitor who was not infrequent, least of all at tea-time, during the same period, in Portland Place; though they had little need to talk of her after practically agreeing that they had outlived her. To the scene of these conversations and suppressions Mrs. Assingham herself made, actually, no approach; her latest view of her utility seeming to be that it had found in Eaton Square its most urgent field. It was finding there in fact everything and everyone but the Prince, who mostly, just now, kept away, or who, at all events, on the interspaced occasions of his calling, happened not to encounter the only person from whom he was a little estranged. It would have been all prodigious if he had not already, with Charlotte's aid, so very considerably lived into it — it would have been all indescribably remarkable, this fact that, with wonderful causes for it so operating on the surface, nobody else, as yet, in the combination, seemed estranged from anybody. If Mrs. Assingham delighted in Maggie she knew by this time how most easily to reach her, and if she was unhappy about Charlotte she knew, by the same reasoning, how most probably to miss that vision of her on which affliction would feed. It might feed of course on finding her so absent from her home — just as this particular phenomenon of her domestic detachment could be, by the anxious mind, best studied there. Fanny was, however, for her reasons, "shy" of Portland Place itself — this was appreciable; so that she might well, after all, have no great light on the question of whether Charlotte's appearances there were frequent or not, any more than on that of the account they might be keeping of the usual solitude (since it came to this) of the head of that house. There

was always, to cover all ambiguities, to constitute a fund of explanation for the divisions of Mrs. Verver's day, the circumstance that, at the point they had all reached together, Mrs. Verver was definitely and by general acclamation in charge of the "social relations" of the family, literally of those of the two households; as to her genius for representing which in the great world and in the grand style vivid evidence had more and more accumulated. It had been established in the two households at an early stage, and with the highest good-humour, that Charlotte was a, was THE, "social success," whereas the Princess, though kind, though punctilious, though charming, though in fact the dearest little creature in the world and the Princess into the bargain, was distinctly not, would distinctly never be, and might as well, practically, give it up: whether through being above it or below it, too much outside of it or too much lost in it, too unequipped or too indisposed, didn't especially matter. What sufficed was that the whole thing, call it appetite or call it patience, the act of representation at large and the daily business of intercourse, fell in with Charlotte's tested facility and, not much less visibly, with her accommodating, her generous, view of her domestic use. She had come, frankly, into the connection, to do and to be what she could, "no questions asked," and she had taken over, accordingly, as it stood, and in the finest practical spirit, the burden of a visiting-list that Maggie, originally, left to herself, and left even more to the Principino, had suffered to get inordinately out of hand.

She had in a word not only mounted, cheerfully, the London treadmill — she had handsomely professed herself, for the further comfort of the three others, sustained in the effort by a "frivolous side," if that were not too harsh a name for a pleasant constitutional curiosity. There were possibilities of dulness, ponderosities of practice, arid social sands, the bad quarters-of-an-hour that turned up like false pieces in a debased currency, of which she made, on principle, very nearly as light as if she had not been clever enough to distinguish. The Prince had, on this score, paid her his compliment soon after her return from her wedding-tour in America, where, by all accounts, she had wondrously borne the brunt; facing brightly, at her husband's side, everything that came up — and what had come, often, was beyond words: just as, precisely, with her own interest only at stake, she had thrown up the game during the visit paid before her marriage. The discussion of the American world, the comparison of notes, impressions and adventures, had been all at hand, as a ground of meeting for Mrs. Verver and her husband's son-in-law, from the hour of the reunion of the two couples. Thus it had been, in short, that Charlotte could, for her friend's appreciation, so promptly make her point; even using expressions from which he let her see, at the hour, that he drew amusement of his own. "What could be more simple than one's going through with everything," she had asked, "when it's so plain a part of one's contract? I've got so much, by my marriage" — for she had never for a moment concealed from him how "much" she had felt it and was finding it "that I should deserve no charity if I stinted my return. Not to do that, to give back on the contrary all one can, are just one's decency and one's honour and one's virtue. These things, henceforth, if you're interested to know, are my rule of life, the absolute little gods of my worship, the holy images set up on the wall. Oh yes, since I'm not a brute," she had wound up, "you shall see me as I AM!" Which was therefore as he had seen her — dealing always, from month to month, from day to day and from one occasion to the other, with the duties of a remunerated office. Her perfect, her brilliant efficiency had doubtless, all the while, contributed immensely to the pleasant ease in which her husband and her husband's daughter were lapped. It had in fact probably done something more than this — it had given them a finer and sweeter view of the possible scope of that ease. They had brought her in — on the crudest expression of it — to do the "worldly" for them, and she had done it with such genius that they had themselves in consequence renounced it even more than they had originally intended. In proportion as she did it, moreover, was she to be relieved of other and humbler doings; which minor matters, by the properest logic, devolved therefore upon Maggie, in whose chords and whose province they more naturally lay. Not less naturally, by the same token, they included the repair, at the hands of the latter young woman, of every stitch conceivably dropped by Charlotte in Eaton Square. This was homely work, but that was just what made it Maggie's. Bearing in mind dear Amerigo, who was so much of her own great mundane feather, and whom the homeliness in question didn't, no doubt, quite equally provide for — that would be, to balance, just in a manner Charlotte's very most charming function, from the moment Charlotte could be got adequately to recognise it.

Well, that Charlotte might be appraised as at last not ineffectually recognising it, was a reflection that, during the days with which we are actually engaged, completed in the Prince's breast these others, these images and ruminations of his leisure, these gropings and fittings of his conscience and his experience, that we have attempted to set in order there. They bore him company, not insufficiently — considering, in especial, his fuller resources in that line — while he worked out — to the last lucidity the principle on which

he forbore either to seek Fanny out in Cadogan Place or to perpetrate the error of too marked an assiduity in Eaton Square. This error would be his not availing himself to the utmost of the convenience of any artless theory of his constitution, or of Charlotte's, that might prevail there. That artless theories could and did prevail was a fact he had ended by accepting, under copious evidence, as definite and ultimate; and it consorted with common prudence, with the simplest economy of life, not to be wasteful of any odd gleaning. To haunt Eaton Square, in fine, would be to show that he had not, like his brilliant associate, a sufficiency of work in the world. It was just his having that sufficiency, it was just their having it together, that, so strangely and so blessedly, made, as they put it to each other, everything possible. What further propped up the case, moreover, was that the "world," by still another beautiful perversity of their chance, included Portland Place without including to anything like the same extent Eaton Square. The latter residence, at the same time, it must promptly be added, did, on occasion, wake up to opportunity and, as giving itself a frolic shake, send out a score of invitations — one of which fitful flights, precisely, had, before Easter, the effect of disturbing a little our young man's measure of his margin. Maggie, with a proper spirit, held that her father ought from time to time to give a really considered dinner, and Mr. Verver, who had as little idea as ever of not meeting expectation, was of the harmonious opinion that his wife ought. Charlotte's own judgment was, always, that they were ideally free — the proof of which would always be, she maintained, that everyone they feared they might most have alienated by neglect would arrive, wreathed with smiles, on the merest hint of a belated signal. Wreathed in smiles, all round, truly enough, these apologetic banquets struck Amerigo as being; they were, frankly, touching occasions to him, marked, in the great London bousculade, with a small, still grace of their own, an investing amenity and humanity. Everybody came, everybody rushed; but all succumbed to the soft influence, and the brutality of mere multitude, of curiosity without tenderness, was put off, at the foot of the fine staircase, with the overcoats and shawls. The entertainment offered a few evenings before Easter, and at which Maggie and he were inevitably present as guests, was a discharge of obligations not insistently incurred, and had thereby, possibly, all the more, the note of this almost Arcadian optimism: a large, bright, dull, murmurous, mild-eyed, middle-aged dinner, involving for the most part very bland, though very exalted, immensely announceable and hierarchically placeable couples, and followed, without the oppression of a later contingent, by a brief instrumental concert, over the preparation of which, the Prince knew, Maggie's anxiety had conferred with Charlotte's ingenuity and both had supremely revelled, as it were, in Mr. Verver's solvency.

The Assinghams were there, by prescription, though quite at the foot of the social ladder, and with the Colonel's wife, in spite of her humility of position, the Prince was more inwardly occupied than with any other person except Charlotte. He was occupied with Charlotte because, in the first place, she looked so inordinately handsome and held so high, where so much else was mature and sedate, the torch of responsive youth and the standard of passive grace; and because of the fact that, in the second, the occasion, so far as it referred itself with any confidence of emphasis to a hostess, seemed to refer itself preferentially, well-meaningly and perversely, to Maggie. It was not indistinguishable to him, when once they were all stationed, that his wife too had in perfection her own little character; but he wondered how it managed so visibly to simplify itself — and this, he knew, in spite of any desire she entertained — to the essential air of having overmuch on her mind the felicity, and indeed the very conduct and credit, of the feast. He knew, as well, the other things of which her appearance was at any time — and in Eaton Square especially — made up: her resemblance to her father, at times so vivid, and coming out, in the delicate warmth of occasions, like the quickened fragrance of a flower; her resemblance, as he had hit it off for her once in Rome, in the first flushed days, after their engagement, to a little dancing-girl at rest, ever so light of movement but most often panting gently, even a shade compunctiously, on a bench; her approximation, finally — for it was analogy, somehow, more than identity — to the transmitted images of rather neutral and negative propriety that made up, in his long line, the average of wifehood and motherhood. If the Roman matron had been, in sufficiency, first and last, the honour of that line, Maggie would no doubt, at fifty, have expanded, have solidified to some such dignity, even should she suggest a little but a Cornelia in miniature. A light, however, broke for him in season, and when once it had done so it made him more than ever aware of Mrs. Verver's vaguely, yet quite exquisitely, contingent participation — a mere hinted or tendered discretion; in short of Mrs. Verver's indescribable, unfathomable relation to the scene. Her placed condition, her natural seat and neighbourhood, her intenser presence, her quieter smile, her fewer jewels, were inevitably all as nothing compared with the preoccupation that burned in Maggie like a small flame and that had in fact kindled in each of her cheeks a

little attesting, but fortunately by no means unbecoming, spot. The party was her father's party, and its greater or smaller success was a question having for her all the importance of his importance; so that sympathy created for her a sort of visible suspense, under pressure of which she bristled with filial reference, with little filial recalls of expression, movement, tone. It was all unmistakable, and as pretty as possible, if one would, and even as funny; but it put the pair so together, as undivided by the marriage of each, that the Princess il n'y avait pas a dire — might sit where she liked: she would still, always, in that house, be irremediably Maggie Verver. The Prince found himself on this occasion so beset with that perception that its natural complement for him would really have been to wonder if Mr. Verver had produced on people something of the same impression in the recorded cases of his having dined with his daughter.

This backward speculation, had it begun to play, however, would have been easily arrested; for it was at present to come over Amerigo as never before that his remarkable father-in-law was the man in the world least equipped with different appearances for different hours. He was simple, he was a revelation of simplicity, and that was the end of him so far as he consisted of an appearance at all — a question that might verily, for a weakness in it, have been argued. It amused our young man, who was taking his pleasure to-night, it will be seen, in sundry occult ways, it amused him to feel how everything else the master of the house consisted of, resources, possessions, facilities and amiabilities amplified by the social legend, depended, for conveying the effect of quantity, on no personal "equation," no mere measurable medium. Quantity was in the air for these good people, and Mr. Verver's estimable quality was almost wholly in that pervasion. He was meagre and modest and clearbrowed, and his eyes, if they wandered without fear, yet stayed without defiance; his shoulders were not broad, his chest was not high, his complexion was not fresh, and the crown of his head was not covered; in spite of all of which he looked, at the top of his table, so nearly like a little boy shyly entertaining in virtue of some imposed rank, that he COULD only be one of the powers, the representative of a force — quite as an infant king is the representative of a dynasty. In this generalised view of his father-in-law, intensified to-night but always operative, Amerigo had now for some time taken refuge. The refuge, after the reunion of the two households in England, had more and more offered itself as the substitute for communities, from man to man, that, by his original calculation, might have become possible, but that had not really ripened and flowered. He met the decent family eyes across the table, met them afterwards in the music-room, but only to read in them still what he had learned to read during his first months, the time of over-anxious initiation, a kind of apprehension in which the terms and conditions were finally fixed and absolute. This directed regard rested at its ease, but it neither lingered nor penetrated, and was, to the Prince's fancy, much of the same order as any glance directed, for due attention, from the same quarter, to the figure of a cheque received in the course of business and about to be enclosed to a banker. It made sure of the amount — and just so, from time to time, the amount of the Prince was made sure. He was being thus, in renewed instalments, perpetually paid in; he already reposed in the bank as a value, but subject, in this comfortable way, to repeated, to infinite endorsement. The net result of all of which, moreover, was that the young man had no wish to see his value diminish. He himself, after all, had not fixed it — the "figure" was a conception all of Mr. Verver's own. Certainly, however, everything must be kept up to it; never so much as to-night had the Prince felt this. He would have been uncomfortable, as these quiet expressions passed, had the case not been guaranteed for him by the intensity of his accord with Charlotte. It was impossible that he should not now and again meet Charlotte's eyes, as it was also visible that she too now and again met her husband's. For her as well, in all his pulses, he felt the conveyed impression. It put them, it kept them together, through the vain show of their separation, made the two other faces, made the whole lapse of the evening, the people, the lights, the flowers, the pretended talk, the exquisite music, a mystic golden bridge between them, strongly swaying and sometimes almost vertiginous, for that intimacy of which the sovereign law would be the vigilance of "care," would be never rashly to forget and never consciously to wound.

XX

The main interest of these hours for us, however, will have been in the way the Prince continued to know, during a particular succession of others, separated from the evening in Eaton Square by a short interval, a certain persistent aftertaste. This was the lingering savour of a cup presented to him by Fanny Assingham's hand after dinner, while the clustered quartette kept their ranged companions, in the music-room, moved if one would, but conveniently motionless. Mrs. Assingham contrived, after a couple of pieces, to convey to her friend that, for her part, she was moved — by the genius of Brahms — beyond what she could bear; so that, without apparent deliberation, she had presently floated away, at the young man's side, to such a distance as permitted them to converse without the effect of disdain. It was the twenty minutes enjoyed with her, during the rest of the concert, in the less associated electric glare of one of the empty rooms — it was their achieved and, as he would have said, successful, most pleasantly successful, talk on one of the sequestered sofas, it was this that was substantially to underlie his consciousness of the later occasion. The later occasion, then mere matter of discussion, had formed her ground for desiring — in a light undertone into which his quick ear read indeed some nervousness — these independent words with him: she had sounded, covertly but distinctly, by the time they were seated together, the great question of what it might involve. It had come out for him before anything else, and so abruptly that this almost needed an explanation. Then the abruptness itself had appeared to explain — which had introduced, in turn, a slight awkwardness. "Do you know that they're not, after all, going to Matcham; so that, if they don't — if, at least, Maggie doesn't — you won't, I suppose, go by yourself?" It was, as I say, at Matcham, where the event had placed him, it was at Matcham during the Easter days, that it most befell him, oddly enough, to live over, inwardly, for its wealth of special significance, this passage by which the event had been really a good deal determined. He had paid, first and last, many an English country visit; he had learned, even from of old, to do the English things, and to do them, all sufficiently, in the English way; if he didn't always enjoy them madly he enjoyed them at any rate as much, to an appearance, as the good people who had, in the night of time, unanimously invented them, and who still, in the prolonged afternoon of their good faith, unanimously, even if a trifle automatically, practised them; yet, with it all, he had never so much as during such sojourns the trick of a certain detached, the amusement of a certain inward critical, life; the determined need, which apparently all participant, of returning upon itself, of backing noiselessly in, far in again, and rejoining there, as it were, that part of his mind that was not engaged at the front. His body, very constantly, was engaged at the front — in shooting, in riding, in golfing, in walking, over the fine diagonals of meadow-paths or round the pocketed corners of billiard-tables; it sufficiently, on the whole, in fact, bore the brunt of bridge-playing, of breakfasting, lunching, tea-drinking, dining, and of the nightly climax over the bottigliera, as he called it, of the bristling tray; it met, finally, to the extent of the limited tax on lip, on gesture, on wit, most of the current demands of conversation and expression. Therefore something of him, he often felt at these times, was left out; it was much more when he was alone, or when he was with his own people — or when he was, say, with Mrs. Verver and nobody else — that he moved, that he talked, that he listened, that he felt, as a congruous whole.

"English society," as he would have said, cut him, accordingly, in two, and he reminded himself often, in his relations with it, of a man possessed of a shining star, a decoration, an order of some sort, something so ornamental as to make his identity not complete, ideally, without it, yet who, finding no other such object generally worn, should be perpetually, and the least bit ruefully, unpinning it from his breast to transfer it to his pocket. The Prince's shining star may, no doubt, having been nothing more precious than his private subtlety; but whatever the object was he just now fingered it a good deal, out of sight — amounting as it mainly did for him to a restless play of memory and a fine embroidery of thought. Something had rather momentously occurred, in Eaton Square, during his enjoyed minutes with his old friend: his present perspective made definitely clear to him that she had plumped out for him her first little lie. That took on — and he could scarce have said why — a sharpness of importance: she had never lied to him before — if only because it had never come up for her, properly, intelligibly, morally, that she must. As soon as she had put to him the question of what he would do — by which she meant of what Charlotte would also do — in that event of Maggie's and Mr. Verver's not embracing the proposal they had appeared for a day or two resignedly to entertain; as soon as she had betrayed her curiosity as to the line the other pair, so left to themselves, might take, a desire to avoid the appearance of at all too directly prying had become marked in

her. Betrayed by the solicitude of which she had, already, three weeks before, given him a view, she had been obliged, on a second thought, to name, intelligibly, a reason for her appeal; while the Prince, on his side, had had, not without mercy, his glimpse of her momentarily groping for one and yet remaining unprovided. Not without mercy because, absolutely, he had on the spot, in his friendliness, invented one for her use, presenting it to her with a look no more significant than if he had picked up, to hand back to her, a dropped flower. "You ask if I'm likely also to back out then, because it may make a difference in what you and the Colonel decide?" — he had gone as far as that for her, fairly inviting her to assent, though not having had his impression, from any indication offered him by Charlotte, that the Assinghams were really in question for the large Matcham party. The wonderful thing, after this, was that the active couple had, in the interval, managed to inscribe themselves on the golden roll; an exertion of a sort that, to do her justice, he had never before observed Fanny to make. This last passage of the chapter but proved, after all, with what success she could work when she would.

Once launched, himself, at any rate, as he had been directed by all the terms of the intercourse between Portland Place and Eaton Square, once steeped, at Matcham, in the enjoyment of a splendid hospitality, he found everything, for his interpretation, for his convenience, fall easily enough into place; and all the more that Mrs. Verver was at hand to exchange ideas and impressions with. The great house was full of people, of possible new combinations, of the quickened play of possible propinquity, and no appearance, of course, was less to be cultivated than that of his having sought an opportunity to foregather with his friend at a safe distance from their respective sposi. There was a happy boldness, at the best, in their mingling thus, each unaccompanied, in the same sustained sociability — just exactly a touch of that eccentricity of associated freedom which sat so lightly on the imagination of the relatives left behind. They were exposed as much as one would to its being pronounced funny that they should, at such a rate, go about together — though, on the other hand, this consideration drew relief from the fact that, in their high conditions and with the easy tradition, the almost inspiring allowances, of the house in question, no individual line, however freely marked, was pronounced anything more than funny. Both our friends felt afresh, as they had felt before, the convenience of a society so placed that it had only its own sensibility to consider — looking as it did well over the heads of all lower growths; and that moreover treated its own sensibility quite as the easiest, friendliest, most informal and domesticated party to the general alliance. What anyone "thought" of anyone else — above all of anyone else with anyone else — was a matter incurring in these lulls so little awkward formulation that hovering judgment, the spirit with the scales, might perfectly have been imaged there as some rather snubbed and subdued, but quite trained and tactful poor relation, of equal, of the properest, lineage, only of aspect a little dingy, doubtless from too limited a change of dress, for whose tacit and abstemious presence, never betrayed by a rattle of her rusty machine, a room in the attic and a plate at the side-table were decently usual. It was amusing, in such lightness of air, that the Prince should again present himself only to speak for the Princess, so unfortunately unable, again, to leave home; and that Mrs. Verver should as regularly figure as an embodied, a beautifully deprecating apology for her husband, who was all geniality and humility among his own treasures, but as to whom the legend had grown up that he couldn't bear, with the height of his standards and the tone of the company, in the way of sofas and cabinets, habitually kept by him, the irritation and depression to which promiscuous visiting, even at pompous houses, had been found to expose him. That was all right, the noted working harmony of the clever son-in-law and the charming stepmother, so long as the relation was, for the effect in question, maintained at the proper point between sufficiency and excess.

What with the noble fairness of the place, meanwhile, the generous mood of the sunny, gusty, lusty English April, all panting and heaving with impatience, or kicking and crying, even, at moments, like some infant Hercules who wouldn't be dressed; what with these things and the bravery of youth and beauty, the insolence of fortune and appetite so diffused among his fellow-guests that the poor Assinghams, in their comparatively marked maturity and their comparatively small splendour, were the only approach to a false note in the concert, the stir of the air was such, for going, in a degree, to one's head, that, as a mere matter of exposure, almost grotesque in its flagrancy, his situation resembled some elaborate practical joke carried out at his expense. Every voice in the great bright house was a call to the ingenuities and impunities of pleasure; every echo was a defiance of difficulty, doubt or danger; every aspect of the picture, a glowing plea for the immediate, and as with plenty more to come, was another phase of the spell. For a world so constituted was governed by a spell, that of the smile of the gods and the favour of the powers; the only handsome, the only

gallant, in fact the only intelligent acceptance of which was a faith in its guarantees and a high spirit for its chances. Its demand — to that the thing came back — was above all for courage and good-humour; and the value of this as a general assurance — that is for seeing one through at the worst — had not even in the easiest hours of his old Roman life struck the Prince so convincingly. His old Roman life had had more poetry, no doubt, but as he looked back upon it now it seemed to hang in the air of mere iridescent horizons, to have been loose and vague and thin, with large languorous unaccountable blanks. The present order, as it spread about him, had somehow the ground under its feet, and a trumpet in its ears, and a bottomless bag of solid shining British sovereigns — which was much to the point — in its hand. Courage and good-humour therefore were the breath of the day; though for ourselves at least it would have been also much to the point that, with Amerigo, really, the innermost effect of all this perceptive ease was perhaps a strange final irritation. He compared the lucid result with the extraordinary substitute for perception that presided, in the bosom of his wife, at so contented a view of his conduct and course — a state of mind that was positively like a vicarious good conscience, cultivated ingeniously on his behalf, a perversity of pressure innocently persisted in; and this wonder of irony became on occasion too intense to be kept wholly to himself. It wasn't that, at Matcham, anything particular, anything monstrous, anything that had to be noticed permitted itself, as they said, to "happen"; there were only odd moments when the breath of the day, as it has been called, struck him so full in the face that he broke out with all the hilarity of "What indeed would THEY have made of it?" "They" were of course Maggie and her father, moping — so far as they ever consented to mope in monotonous Eaton Square, but placid too in the belief that they knew beautifully what their expert companions were in for. They knew, it might have appeared in these lights, absolutely nothing on earth worth speaking of — whether beautifully or cynically; and they would perhaps sometimes be a little less trying if they would only once for all peacefully admit that knowledge wasn't one of their needs and that they were in fact constitutionally inaccessible to it. They were good children, bless their hearts, and the children of good children; so that, verily, the Principino himself, as less consistently of that descent, might figure to the fancy as the ripest genius of the trio.

The difficulty was, for the nerves of daily intercourse with Maggie in particular, that her imagination was clearly never ruffled by the sense of any anomaly. The great anomaly would have been that her husband, or even that her father's wife, should prove to have been made, for the long run, after the pattern set from so far back to the Ververs. If one was so made one had certainly no business, on any terms, at Matcham; whereas if one wasn't one had no business there on the particular terms — terms of conformity with the principles of Eaton Square — under which one had been so absurdly dedicated. Deep at the heart of that resurgent unrest in our young man which we have had to content ourselves with calling his irritation — deep in the bosom of this falsity of position glowed the red spark of his inextinguishable sense of a higher and braver propriety. There were situations that were ridiculous, but that one couldn't yet help, as for instance when one's wife chose, in the most usual way, to make one so. Precisely here, however, was the difference; it had taken poor Maggie to invent a way so extremely unusual — yet to which, none the less, it would be too absurd that he should merely lend himself. Being thrust, systematically, with another woman, and a woman one happened, by the same token, exceedingly to like, and being so thrust that the theory of it seemed to publish one as idiotic or incapable — this WAS a predicament of which the dignity depended all on one's own handling. What was supremely grotesque, in fact, was the essential opposition of theories — as if a galantuomo, as HE at least constitutionally conceived galantuomini, could do anything BUT blush to "go about" at such a rate with such a person as Mrs. Verver in a state of childlike innocence, the state of our primitive parents before the Fall. The grotesque theory, as he would have called it, was perhaps an odd one to resent with violence, and he did it — also as a man of the world — all merciful justice; but, assuredly, none the less, there was but one way REALLY to mark, and for his companion as much as for himself, the commiseration in which they held it. Adequate comment on it could only be private, but it could also at least be active, and of rich and effectual comment Charlotte and he were fortunately alike capable. Wasn't this consensus literally their only way not to be ungracious? It was positively as if the measure of their escape from that danger were given by the growth between them, during their auspicious visit, of an exquisite sense of complicity.

XXI

He found himself therefore saying, with gaiety, even to Fanny Assingham, for their common, concerned glance at Eaton Square, the glance that was so markedly never, as it might have been, a glance at Portland Place: "What WOULD our cari sposi have made of it here? what would they, you know, really?" — which overflow would have been reckless if, already, and surprisingly perhaps even to himself, he had not got used to thinking of this friend as a person in whom the element of protest had of late been unmistakably allayed. He exposed himself of course to her replying: "Ah, if it would have been so bad for them, how can it be so good for you?" — but, quite apart from the small sense the question would have had at the best, she appeared already to unite with him in confidence and cheer. He had his view, as well — or at least a partial one — of the inner spring of this present comparative humility, which was all consistent with the retraction he had practically seen her make after Mr. Verver's last dinner. Without diplomatising to do so, with no effort to square her, none to bribe her to an attitude for which he would have had no use in her if it were not sincere, he yet felt how he both held her and moved her by the felicity of his taking pity, all instinctively, on her just discernible depression. By just so much as he guessed that she felt herself, as the slang was, out of it, out of the crystal current and the expensive picture, by just so much had his friendship charmingly made up to her, from hour to hour, for the penalties, as they might have been grossly called, of her mistake. Her mistake had only been, after all, in her wanting to seem to him straight; she had let herself in for being — as she had made haste, for that matter, during the very first half-hour, at tea, to proclaim herself — the sole and single frump of the party. The scale of everything was so different that all her minor values, her quainter graces, her little local authority, her humour and her wardrobe alike, for which it was enough elsewhere, among her bons amis, that they were hers, dear Fanny Assingham's — these matters and others would be all, now, as nought: five minutes had sufficed to give her the fatal pitch. In Cadogan Place she could always, at the worst, be picturesque — for she habitually spoke of herself as "local" to Sloane Street whereas at Matcham she should never be anything but horrible. And it all would have come, the disaster, from the real refinement, in her, of the spirit of friendship. To prove to him that she wasn't really watching him — ground for which would have been too terribly grave — she had followed him in his pursuit of pleasure: SO she might, precisely, mark her detachment. This was handsome trouble for her to take — the Prince could see it all: it wasn't a shade of interference that a good-natured man would visit on her. So he didn't even say, when she told him how frumpy she knew herself, how frumpy her very maid, odiously going back on her, rubbed it into her, night and morning, with unsealed eyes and lips, that she now knew her — he didn't then say "Ah, see what you've done: isn't it rather your own fault?" He behaved differently altogether: eminently distinguished himself — for she told him she had never seen him so universally distinguished — he yet distinguished her in her obscurity, or in what was worse, her objective absurdity, and frankly invested her with her absolute value, surrounded her with all the importance of her wit. That wit, as discriminated from stature and complexion, a sense for "bridge" and a credit for pearls, could have importance was meanwhile but dimly perceived at Matcham; so that his "niceness" to her — she called it only niceness, but it brought tears into her eyes — had the greatness of a general as well as of a special demonstration.

"She understands," he said, as a comment on all this, to Mrs. Verver— "she understands all she needs to understand. She has taken her time, but she has at last made it out for herself: she sees how all we can desire is to give them the life they prefer, to surround them with the peace and quiet, and above all with the sense of security, most favourable to it. She can't of course very well put it to us that we have, so far as she is concerned, but to make the best of our circumstances; she can't say in so many words 'Don't think of me, for I too must make the best of mine: arrange as you can, only, and live as you must.' I don't get quite THAT from her, any more than I ask for it. But her tone and her whole manner mean nothing at all unless they mean that she trusts us to take as watchful, to take as artful, to take as tender care, in our way, as she so anxiously takes in hers. So that she's — well," the Prince wound up, "what you may call practically all right." Charlotte in fact, however, to help out his confidence, didn't call it anything; return as he might to the lucidity, the importance, or whatever it was, of this lesson, she gave him no aid toward reading it aloud. She let him, two or three times over, spell it out for himself; only on the eve of their visit's end was she, for once, clear or direct in response. They had found a minute together in the great hall of the house during the half-hour before dinner; this easiest of chances they had already, a couple of times, arrived at by waiting persistently till the

last other loiterers had gone to dress, and by being prepared themselves to dress so expeditiously that they might, a little later on, be among the first to appear in festal array. The hall then was empty, before the army of rearranging, cushion-patting housemaids were marshalled in, and there was a place by the forsaken fire, at one end, where they might imitate, with art, the unpremeditated. Above all, here, for the snatched instants, they could breathe so near to each other that the interval was almost engulfed in it, and the intensity both of the union and the caution became a workable substitute for contact. They had prolongations of instants that counted as visions of bliss; they had slow approximations that counted as long caresses. The quality of these passages, in truth, made the spoken word, and especially the spoken word about other people, fall below them; so that our young woman's tone had even now a certain dryness. "It's very good of her, my dear, to trust us. But what else can she do?"

"Why, whatever people do when they don't trust. Let one see they don't."

"But let whom see?"

"Well, let ME, say, to begin with."

"And should you mind that?"

He had a slight show of surprise. "Shouldn't you?"

"Her letting you see? No," said Charlotte; "the only thing I can imagine myself minding is what you yourself, if you don't look out, may let HER see." To which she added: "You may let her see, you know, that you're afraid."

"I'm only afraid of you, a little, at moments," he presently returned. "But I shan't let Fanny see that."

It was clear, however, that neither the limits nor the extent of Mrs. Assingham's vision were now a real concern to her, and she gave expression to this as she had not even yet done. "What in the world can she do against us? There's not a word that she can breathe. She's helpless; she can't speak; she would be herself the first to be dished by it." And then as he seemed slow to follow: "It all comes back to her. It all began with her. Everything, from the first. She introduced you to Maggie. She made your marriage."

The Prince might have had his moment of demur, but at this, after a little, as with a smile dim but deep, he came on. "Mayn't she also be said, a good deal, to have made yours? That was intended, I think, wasn't it? for a kind of rectification."

Charlotte, on her side, for an instant, hesitated; then she was prompter still. "I don't mean there was anything to rectify; everything was as it had to be, and I'm not speaking of how she may have been concerned for you and me. I'm speaking of how she took, in her way, each time, THEIR lives in hand, and how, therefore, that ties her up to-day. She can't go to them and say 'It's very awkward of course, you poor dear things, but I was frivolously mistaken.'"

He took it in still, with his long look at her. "All the more that she wasn't. She was right. Everything's right," he went on, "and everything will stay so."

"Then that's all I say."

But he worked it out, for the deeper satisfaction, even to superfluous lucidity. "We're happy, and they're happy. What more does the position admit of? What more need Fanny Assingham want?"

"Ah, my dear," said Charlotte, "it's not I who say that she need want anything. I only say that she's FIXED, that she must stand exactly where everything has, by her own act, placed her. It's you who have seemed haunted with the possibility, for her, of some injurious alternative, something or other we must be prepared for." And she had, with her high reasoning, a strange cold smile. "We ARE prepared — for anything, for everything; and AS we are, practically, so she must take us. She's condemned to consistency; she's doomed, poor thing, to a genial optimism. That, luckily for her, however, is very much the law of her nature. She was born to soothe and to smooth. Now then, therefore," Mrs. Verver gently laughed, "she has the chance of her life!"

"So that her present professions may, even at the best, not be sincere? — may be but a mask for doubts and fears, and for gaining time?"

The Prince had looked, with the question, as if this, again, could trouble him, and it determined in his companion a slight impatience. "You keep talking about such things as if they were our affair at all. I feel, at any rate, that I've nothing to do with her doubts and fears, or with anything she may feel. She must arrange all that for herself. It's enough for me that she'll always be, of necessity, much more afraid for herself, REALLY, either to see or to speak, than we should be to have her do it even if we were the idiots and cowards we aren't." And Charlotte's face, with these words — to the mitigation of the slightly hard ring there

might otherwise have been in them — fairly lightened, softened, shone out. It reflected as really never yet the rare felicity of their luck. It made her look for the moment as if she had actually pronounced that word of unpermitted presumption — so apt is the countenance, as with a finer consciousness than the tongue, to betray a sense of this particular lapse. She might indeed, the next instant, have seen her friend wince, in advance, at her use of a word that was already on her lips; for it was still unmistakable with him that there were things he could prize, forms of fortune he could cherish, without at all proportionately liking their names. Had all this, however, been even completely present to his companion, what other term could she have applied to the strongest and simplest of her ideas but the one that exactly fitted it? She applied it then, though her own instinct moved her, at the same time, to pay her tribute to the good taste from which they hadn't heretofore by a hair's breadth deviated. "If it didn't sound so vulgar I should say that we're — fatally, as it were — SAFE. Pardon the low expression — since it's what we happen to be. We're so because they are. And they're so because they can't be anything else, from the moment that, having originally intervened for them, she wouldn't now be able to bear herself if she didn't keep them so. That's the way she's inevitably WITH us," said Charlotte over her smile. "We hang, essentially, together."

Well, the Prince candidly allowed she did bring it home to him. Every way it worked out. "Yes, I see. We hang, essentially, together."

His friend had a shrug — a shrug that had a grace. "Cosa volete?" The effect, beautifully, nobly, was more than Roman. "Ah, beyond doubt, it's a case."

He stood looking at her. "It's a case. There can't," he said, "have been many."

"Perhaps never, never, never any other. That," she smiled, "I confess I should like to think. Only ours."

"Only ours — most probably. Speriamo." To which, as after hushed connections, he presently added: "Poor Fanny!" But Charlotte had already, with a start and a warning hand, turned from a glance at the clock. She sailed away to dress, while he watched her reach the staircase. His eyes followed her till, with a simple swift look round at him, she vanished. Something in the sight, however, appeared to have renewed the spring of his last exclamation, which he breathed again upon the air. "Poor, poor Fanny!"

It was to prove, however, on the morrow, quite consistent with the spirit of these words that, the party at Matcham breaking up and multitudinously dispersing, he should be able to meet the question of the social side of the process of repatriation with due presence of mind. It was impossible, for reasons, that he should travel to town with the Assinghams; it was impossible, for the same reasons, that he should travel to town save in the conditions that he had for the last twenty-four hours been privately, and it might have been said profoundly, thinking out. The result of his thought was already precious to him, and this put at his service, he sufficiently believed, the right tone for disposing of his elder friend's suggestion, an assumption in fact equally full and mild, that he and Charlotte would conveniently take the same train and occupy the same compartment as the Colonel and herself. The extension of the idea to Mrs. Verver had been, precisely, a part of Mrs. Assingham's mildness, and nothing could better have characterised her sense for social shades than her easy perception that the gentleman from Portland Place and the lady from Eaton Square might now confess, quite without indiscretion, to simultaneity of movement. She had made, for the four days, no direct appeal to the latter personage, but the Prince was accidental witness of her taking a fresh start at the moment the company were about to scatter for the last night of their stay. There had been, at this climax, the usual preparatory talk about hours and combinations, in the midst of which poor Fanny gently approached Mrs. Verver. She said "You and the Prince, love," — quite, apparently, without blinking; she took for granted their public withdrawal together; she remarked that she and Bob were alike ready, in the interest of sociability, to take any train that would make them all one party. "I feel really as if, all this time, I had seen nothing of you" — that gave an added grace to the candour of the dear thing's approach. But just then it was, on the other hand, that the young man found himself borrow most effectively the secret of the right tone for doing as he preferred. His preference had, during the evening, not failed of occasion to press him with mute insistences; practically without words, without any sort of straight telegraphy, it had arrived at a felt identity with Charlotte's own. She spoke all for their friend while she answered their friend's question, but she none the less signalled to him as definitely as if she had fluttered a white handkerchief from a window. "It's awfully sweet of you, darling — our going together would be charming. But you mustn't mind us — you must suit yourselves we've settled, Amerigo and I, to stay over till after luncheon."

Amerigo, with the chink of this gold in his ear, turned straight away, so as not to be instantly appealed to; and for the very emotion of the wonder, furthermore, of what divination may achieve when winged by a

community of passion. Charlotte had uttered the exact plea that he had been keeping ready for the same foreseen necessity, and had uttered it simply as a consequence of their deepening unexpressed need of each other and without the passing between them of a word. He hadn't, God knew, to take it from her — he was too conscious of what he wanted; but the lesson for him was in the straight clear tone that Charlotte could thus distil, in the perfect felicity of her adding no explanation, no touch for plausibility, that she wasn't strictly obliged to add, and in the truly superior way in which women, so situated, express and distinguish themselves. She had answered Mrs. Assingham quite adequately; she had not spoiled it by a reason a scrap larger than the smallest that would serve, and she had, above all, thrown off, for his stretched but covered attention, an image that flashed like a mirror played at the face of the sun. The measure of EVERYTHING, to all his sense, at these moments, was in it — the measure especially of the thought that had been growing with him a positive obsession and that began to throb as never yet under this brush of her having, by perfect parity of imagination, the match for it. His whole consciousness had by this time begun almost to ache with a truth of an exquisite order, at the glow of which she too had, so unmistakably then, been warming herself — the truth that the occasion constituted by the last few days couldn't possibly, save by some poverty of their own, refuse them some still other and still greater beauty. It had already told them, with an hourly voice, that it had a meaning — a meaning that their associated sense was to drain even as thirsty lips, after the plough through the sands and the sight, afar, of the palm-cluster, might drink in at last the promised well in the desert. There had been beauty, day after day, and there had been, for the spiritual lips, something of the pervasive taste of it; yet it was all, none the less, as if their response had remained below their fortune. How to bring it, by some brave, free lift, up to the same height was the idea with which, behind and beneath everything, he was restlessly occupied, and in the exploration of which, as in that of the sun-chequered greenwood of romance, his spirit thus, at the opening of a vista, met hers. They were already, from that moment, so hand-in-hand in the place that he found himself making use, five minutes later, of exactly the same tone as Charlotte's for telling Mrs. Assingham that he was likewise, in the matter of the return to London, sorry for what mightn't be.

This had become, of a sudden, the simplest thing in the world — the sense of which moreover seemed really to amount to a portent that he should feel, forevermore, on the general head, conveniently at his ease with her. He went in fact a step further than Charlotte — put the latter forward as creating his necessity. She was staying over luncheon to oblige their hostess — as a consequence of which he must also stay to see her decently home. He must deliver her safe and sound, he felt, in Eaton Square. Regret as he might, too, the difference made by this obligation, he frankly didn't mind, inasmuch as, over and above the pleasure itself, his scruple would certainly gratify both Mr. Verver and Maggie. They never yet had absolutely and entirely learned, he even found deliberation to intimate, how little he really neglected the first — as it seemed nowadays quite to have become — of his domestic duties: therefore he still constantly felt how little he must remit his effort to make them remark it. To which he added with equal lucidity that they would return in time for dinner, and if he didn't, as a last word, subjoin that it would be "lovely" of Fanny to find, on her own return, a moment to go to Eaton Square and report them as struggling bravely on, this was not because the impulse, down to the very name for the amiable act, altogether failed to rise. His inward assurance, his general plan, had at moments, where she was concerned, its drops of continuity, and nothing would less have pleased him than that she should suspect in him, however tempted, any element of conscious "cheek." But he was always — that was really the upshot — cultivating thanklessly the considerate and the delicate: it was a long lesson, this unlearning, with people of English race, all the little superstitions that accompany friendship. Mrs. Assingham herself was the first to say that she would unfailingly "report"; she brought it out in fact, he thought, quite wonderfully — having attained the summit of the wonderful during the brief interval that had separated her appeal to Charlotte from this passage with himself. She had taken the five minutes, obviously, amid the rest of the talk and the movement, to retire into her tent for meditation — which showed, among several things, the impression Charlotte had made on her. It was from the tent she emerged, as with arms refurbished; though who indeed could say if the manner in which she now met him spoke most, really, of the glitter of battle or of the white waver of the flag of truce? The parley was short either way; the gallantry of her offer was all sufficient.

"I'll go to our friends then — I'll ask for luncheon. I'll tell them when to expect you."

"That will be charming. Say we're all right."

"All right — precisely. I can't say more," Mrs. Assingham smiled.

“No doubt.” But he considered, as for the possible importance of it. “Neither can you, by what I seem to feel, say less.”

“Oh, I WON’T say less!” Fanny laughed; with which, the next moment, she had turned away. But they had it again, not less bravely, on the morrow, after breakfast, in the thick of the advancing carriages and the exchange of farewells. “I think I’ll send home my maid from Euston,” she was then prepared to amend, “and go to Eaton Square straight. So you can be easy.”

“Oh, I think we’re easy,” the Prince returned. “Be sure to say, at any rate, that we’re bearing up.”

“You’re bearing up — good. And Charlotte returns to dinner?”

“To dinner. We’re not likely, I think, to make another night away.”

“Well then, I wish you at least a pleasant day,”

“Oh,” he laughed as they separated, “we shall do our best for it!” — after which, in due course, with the announcement of their conveyance, the Assinghams rolled off.

XXII

It was quite, for the Prince, after this, as if the view had further cleared; so that the half-hour during which he strolled on the terrace and smoked — the day being lovely — overflowed with the plenitude of its particular quality. Its general brightness was composed, doubtless, of many elements, but what shone out of it as if the whole place and time had been a great picture, from the hand of genius, presented to him as a prime ornament for his collection and all varnished and framed to hang up — what marked it especially for the highest appreciation was his extraordinarily unchallenged, his absolutely appointed and enhanced possession of it. Poor Fanny Assingham's challenge amounted to nothing: one of the things he thought of while he leaned on the old marble balustrade — so like others that he knew in still more nobly-terraced Italy — was that she was squared, all-conveniently even to herself, and that, rumbling toward London with this contentment, she had become an image irrelevant to the scene. It further passed across him, as his imagination was, for reasons, during the time, unprecedentedly active, — that he had, after all, gained more from women than he had ever lost by them; there appeared so, more and more, on those mystic books that are kept, in connection with such commerce, even by men of the loosest business habits, a balance in his favour that he could pretty well, as a rule, take for granted. What were they doing at this very moment, wonderful creatures, but combine and conspire for his advantage? — from Maggie herself, most wonderful, in her way, of all, to his hostess of the present hour, into whose head it had so inevitably come to keep Charlotte on, for reasons of her own, and who had asked, in this benevolent spirit, why in the world, if not obliged, without plausibility, to hurry, her husband's son-in-law should not wait over in her company. He would at least see, Lady Castledean had said, that nothing dreadful should happen to her, either while still there or during the exposure of the run to town; and, for that matter, if they exceeded a little their license it would positively help them to have done so together. Each of them would, in this way, at home, have the other comfortably to blame. All of which, besides, in Lady Castledean as in Maggie, in Fanny Assingham as in Charlotte herself, was working; for him without provocation or pressure, by the mere play of some vague sense on their part — definite and conscious at the most only in Charlotte — that he was not, as a nature, as a character, as a gentleman, in fine, below his remarkable fortune.

But there were more things before him than even these; things that melted together, almost indistinguishably, to feed his sense of beauty. If the outlook was in every way spacious — and the towers of three cathedrals, in different counties, as had been pointed out to him, gleamed discernibly, like dim silver, in the rich sameness of tone — didn't he somehow the more feel it so because, precisely, Lady Castledean had kept over a man of her own, and that this offered a certain sweet intelligibility as the note of the day? It made everything fit; above all it diverted him to the extent of keeping up, while he lingered and waited, his meditative smile. She had detained Charlotte because she wished to detain Mr. Blint, and she couldn't detain Mr. Blint, disposed though he clearly was to oblige her, without spreading over the act some ampler drapery. Castledean had gone up to London; the place was all her own; she had had a fancy for a quiet morning with Mr. Blint, a sleek, civil, accomplished young man — distinctly younger than her ladyship — who played and sang delightfully (played even "bridge" and sang the English-comic as well as the French-tragic), and the presence — which really meant the absence — of a couple of other friends, if they were happily chosen, would make everything all right. The Prince had the sense, all good-humouredly, of being happily chosen, and it was not spoiled for him even by another sense that followed in its train and with which, during his life in England, he had more than once had reflectively to deal: the state of being reminded how, after all, as an outsider, a foreigner, and even as a mere representative husband and son-in-law, he was so irrelevant to the working of affairs that he could be bent on occasion to uses comparatively trivial. No other of her guests would have been thus convenient for their hostess; affairs, of whatever sorts, had claimed, by early trains, every active, easy, smoothly-working man, each in his way a lubricated item of the great social, political, administrative engrenage — claimed most of all Castledean himself, who was so very oddly, given the personage and the type, rather a large item. If he, on the other hand, had an affair, it was not of that order; it was of the order, verily, that he had been reduced to as a not quite glorious substitute.

It marked, however, the feeling of the hour with him that this vision of being "reduced" interfered not at all with the measure of his actual ease. It kept before him again, at moments, the so familiar fact of his sacrifices — down to the idea of the very relinquishment, for his wife's convenience, of his real situation in the world;

with the consequence, thus, that he was, in the last analysis, among all these so often inferior people, practically held cheap and made light of. But though all this was sensible enough there was a spirit in him that could rise above it, a spirit that positively played with the facts, with all of them; from that of the droll ambiguity of English relations to that of his having in mind something quite beautiful and independent and harmonious, something wholly his own. He couldn't somehow take Mr. Blint seriously — he was much more an outsider, by the larger scale, even than a Roman prince who consented to be in abeyance. Yet it was past finding out, either, how such a woman as Lady Castledean could take him — since this question but sank for him again into the fathomless depths of English equivocation. He knew them all, as was said, "well"; he had lived with them, stayed with them, dined, hunted, shot and done various other things with them; but the number of questions about them he couldn't have answered had much rather grown than shrunken, so that experience struck him for the most part as having left in him but one residual impression. They didn't like les situations nettes — that was all he was very sure of. They wouldn't have them at any price; it had been their national genius and their national success to avoid them at every point. They called it themselves, with complacency, their wonderful spirit of compromise — the very influence of which actually so hung about him here, from moment to moment, that the earth and the air, the light and the colour, the fields and the hills and the sky, the blue-green counties and the cold cathedrals, owed to it every accent of their tone. Verily, as one had to feel in presence of such a picture, it had succeeded; it had made, up to now, for that seated solidity, in the rich sea-mist, on which the garish, the supposedly envious, peoples have ever cooled their eyes. But it was at the same time precisely why even much initiation left one, at given moments, so puzzled as to the element of staleness in all the freshness and of freshness in all the staleness, of innocence in the guilt and of guilt in the innocence. There were other marble terraces, sweeping more purple prospects, on which he would have known what to think, and would have enjoyed thereby at least the small intellectual fillip of a discerned relation between a given appearance and a taken meaning. The inquiring mind, in these present conditions, might, it was true, be more sharply challenged; but the result of its attention and its ingenuity, it had unluckily learned to know, was too often to be confronted with a mere dead wall, a lapse of logic, a confirmed bewilderment. And moreover, above all, nothing mattered, in the relation of the enclosing scene to his own consciousness, but its very most direct bearings.

Lady Castledean's dream of Mr. Blint for the morning was doubtless already, with all the spacious harmonies re-established, taking the form of "going over" something with him, at the piano, in one of the numerous smaller rooms that were consecrated to the less gregarious uses; what she had wished had been effected — her convenience had been assured. This made him, however, wonder the more where Charlotte was — since he didn't at all suppose her to be making a tactless third, which would be to have accepted mere spectatorship, in the duet of their companions. The upshot of everything for him, alike of the less and of the more, was that the exquisite day bloomed there like a large fragrant flower that he had only to gather. But it was to Charlotte he wished to make the offering, and as he moved along the terrace, which rendered visible parts of two sides of the house, he looked up at all the windows that were open to the April morning, and wondered which of them would represent his friend's room. It befell thus that his question, after no long time, was answered; he saw Charlotte appear above as if she had been called by the pausing of his feet on the flags. She had come to the sill, on which she leaned to look down, and she remained there a minute smiling at him. He had been immediately struck with her wearing a hat and a jacket — which conduced to her appearance of readiness not so much to join him, with a beautiful uncovered head and a parasol, where he stood, as to take with him some larger step altogether. The larger step had been, since the evening before, intensely in his own mind, though he had not fully thought out, even yet, the slightly difficult detail of it; but he had had no chance, such as he needed, to speak the definite word to her, and the face she now showed affected him, accordingly, as a notice that she had wonderfully guessed it for herself. They had these identities of impulse — they had had them repeatedly before; and if such unarranged but unerring encounters gave the measure of the degree in which people were, in the common phrase, meant for each other, no union in the world had ever been more sweetened with rightness. What in fact most often happened was that her rightness went, as who should say, even further than his own; they were conscious of the same necessity at the same moment, only it was she, as a general thing, who most clearly saw her way to it. Something in her long look at him now out of the old grey window, something in the very poise of her hat, the colour of her necktie, the prolonged stillness of her smile, touched into sudden light for him all the wealth of the fact that he could count on her. He had his hand there, to pluck it, on the open bloom of the day; but what did the bright minute mean but that her

answering hand was already intelligently out? So, therefore, while the minute lasted, it passed between them that their cup was full; which cup their very eyes, holding it fast, carried and steadied and began, as they tasted it, to praise. He broke, however, after a moment, the silence.

"It only wants a moon, a mandolin, and a little danger, to be a serenade."

"Ah, then," she lightly called down, "let it at least have THIS!" With which she detached a rich white rosebud from its company with another in the front of her dress and flung it down to him. He caught it in its fall, fixing her again after she had watched him place it in his buttonhole. "Come down quickly!" he said in an Italian not loud but deep.

"Vengo, vengo!" she as clearly, but more lightly, tossed out; and she had left him the next minute to wait for her.

He came along the terrace again, with pauses during which his eyes rested, as they had already often done, on the brave darker wash of far-away watercolour that represented the most distant of the cathedral towns. This place, with its great church and its high accessibility, its towers that distinguishably signalled, its English history, its appealing type, its acknowledged interest, this place had sounded its name to him half the night through, and its name had become but another name, the pronounceable and convenient one, for that supreme sense of things which now throbbed within him. He had kept saying to himself "Gloucester, Gloucester, Gloucester," quite as if the sharpest meaning of all the years just passed were intensely expressed in it. That meaning was really that his situation remained quite sublimely consistent with itself, and that they absolutely, he and Charlotte, stood there together in the very lustre of this truth. Every present circumstance helped to proclaim it; it was blown into their faces as by the lips of the morning. He knew why, from the first of his marriage, he had tried with such patience for such conformity; he knew why he had given up so much and bored himself so much; he knew why he, at any rate, had gone in, on the basis of all forms, on the basis of his having, in a manner, sold himself, for a situation nette. It had all been just in order that his — well, what on earth should he call it but his freedom? — should at present be as perfect and rounded and lustrous as some huge precious pearl. He hadn't struggled nor snatched; he was taking but what had been given him; the pearl dropped itself, with its exquisite quality and rarity, straight into his hand. Here, precisely, it was, incarnate; its size and its value grew as Mrs. Verver appeared, afar off, in one of the smaller doorways. She came toward him in silence, while he moved to meet her; the great scale of this particular front, at Matcham, multiplied thus, in the golden morning, the stages of their meeting and the successions of their consciousness. It wasn't till she had come quite close that he produced for her his "Gloucester, Gloucester, Gloucester," and his "Look at it over there!"

She knew just where to look. "Yes — isn't it one of the best? There are cloisters or towers or some thing." And her eyes, which, though her lips smiled, were almost grave with their depths of acceptance; came back to him. "Or the tomb of some old king."

"We must see the old king; we must 'do' the cathedral," he said; "we must know all about it. If we could but take," he exhaled, "the full opportunity!" And then while, for all they seemed to give him, he sounded again her eyes: "I feel the day like a great gold cup that we must somehow drain together."

"I feel it, as you always make me feel everything, just as you do; so that I know ten miles off how you feel! But do you remember," she asked, "apropos of great gold cups, the beautiful one, the real one, that I offered you so long ago and that you wouldn't have? Just before your marriage" — she brought it back to him: "the gilded crystal bowl in the little Bloomsbury shop."

"Oh yes!" — but it took, with a slight surprise on the 'Prince's part, some small recollecting. "The treacherous cracked thing you wanted to palm off on me, and the little swindling Jew who understood Italian and who backed you up! But I feel this an occasion," he immediately added, "and I hope you don't mean," he smiled, "that AS an occasion it's also cracked."

They spoke, naturally, more low than loud, overlooked as they were, though at a respectful distance, by tiers of windows; but it made each find in the other's voice a taste as of something slowly and deeply absorbed. "Don't you think too much of 'cracks,' and aren't you too afraid of them? I risk the cracks," said Charlotte, "and I've often recalled the bowl and the little swindling Jew, wondering if they've parted company. He made," she said, "a great impression on me."

"Well, you also, no doubt, made a great impression on him, and I dare say that if you were to go back to him you'd find he has been keeping that treasure for you. But as to cracks," the Prince went on— "what did you tell me the other day you prettily call them in English?-'rifts within the lute'? — risk them as much as

you like for yourself, but don't risk them for me." He spoke it in all the gaiety of his just barely-tremulous serenity. "I go, as you know, by my superstitions. And that's why," he said, "I know where we are. They're every one, to-day, on our side."

Resting on the parapet; toward the great view, she was silent a little, and he saw the next moment that her eyes were closed. "I go but by one thing." Her hand was on the sun-warmed stone; so that, turned as they were away from the house, he put his own upon it and covered it. "I go by YOU," she said. "I go by you."

So they remained a moment, till he spoke again with a gesture that matched. "What is really our great necessity, you know, is to go by my watch. It's already eleven" — he had looked at the time; "so that if we stop here to luncheon what becomes of our afternoon?"

To this Charlotte's eyes opened straight. "There's not the slightest need of our stopping here to luncheon. Don't you see," she asked, "how I'm ready?" He had taken it in, but there was always more and more of her. "You mean you've arranged — ?"

"It's easy to arrange. My maid goes up with my things. You've only to speak to your man about yours, and they can go together."

"You mean we can leave at once?"

She let him have it all. "One of the carriages, about which I spoke, will already have come back for us. If your superstitions are on our side," she smiled, "so my arrangements are, and I'll back my support against yours."

"Then you had thought," he wondered, "about Gloucester?"

She hesitated — but it was only her way. "I thought you would think. We have, thank goodness, these harmonies. They are food for superstition if you like. It's beautiful," she went on, "that it should be Gloucester; 'Glo'ster, Glo'ster,' as you say, making it sound like an old song. However, I'm sure Glo'ster, Glo'ster will be charming," she still added; "we shall be able easily to lunch there, and, with our luggage and our servants off our hands, we shall have at least three or four hours. We can wire," she wound up, "from there."

Ever so quietly she had brought it, as she had thought it, all out, and it had to be as covertly that he let his appreciation expand. "Then Lady Castledean — ?"

"Doesn't dream of our staying."

He took it, but thinking yet. "Then what does she dream — ?"

"Of Mr. Blint, poor dear; of Mr. Blint only." Her smile for him — for the Prince himself — was free. "Have I positively to tell you that she doesn't want us? She only wanted us for the others — to show she wasn't left alone with him. Now that that's done, and that they've all gone, she of course knows for herself — !"

"'Knows'?" the Prince vaguely echoed.

"Why, that we like cathedrals; that we inevitably stop to see them, or go round to take them in, whenever we've a chance; that it's what our respective families quite expect of us and would be disappointed for us to fail of. This, as forestieri," Mrs. Verver pursued, "would be our pull — if our pull weren't indeed so great all round."

He could only keep his eyes on her. "And have you made out the very train — ?"

"The very one. Paddington — the 6.50 'in.' That gives us oceans; we can dine, at the usual hour, at home; and as Maggie will of course be in Eaton Square I hereby invite you."

For a while he still but looked at her; it was a minute before he spoke. "Thank you very much. With pleasure." To which he in a moment added: "But the train for Gloucester?"

"A local one — 11.22; with several stops, but doing it a good deal, I forget how much, within the hour. So that we've time. Only," she said, "we must employ our time."

He roused himself as from the mere momentary spell of her; he looked again at his watch while they moved back to the door through which she had advanced. But he had also again questions and stops — all as for the mystery and the charm. "You looked it up — without my having asked you?"

"Ah, my dear," she laughed, "I've seen you with Bradshaw! It takes Anglo-Saxon blood."

"'Blood'?" he echoed. "You've that of every race!" It kept her before him. "You're terrible."

Well, he could put it as he liked. "I know the name of the inn."

"What is it then?"

"There are two — you'll see. But I've chosen the right one. And I think I remember the tomb," she smiled.

“Oh, the tomb — !” Any tomb would do for him. “But I mean I had been keeping my idea so cleverly for you, while there you already were with it.”

“You had been keeping it ‘for’ me as much as you like. But how do you make out,” she asked, “that you were keeping it FROM me?”

“I don’t — now. How shall I ever keep anything — some day when I shall wish to?”

“Ah, for things I mayn’t want to know, I promise you shall find me stupid.” They had reached their door, where she herself paused to explain. “These days, yesterday, last night, this morning, I’ve wanted everything.”

Well, it was all right. “You shall have everything.”

XXIII

Fanny, on her arrival in town, carried out her second idea, despatching the Colonel to his club for luncheon and packing her maid into a cab, for Cadogan Place, with the variety of their effects. The result of this for each of the pair was a state of occupation so unbroken that the day practically passed without fresh contact between them. They dined out together, but it was both in going to their dinner and in coming back that they appeared, on either side, to have least to communicate. Fanny was wrapped in her thoughts still more closely than in the lemon-coloured mantle that protected her bare shoulders, and her husband, with her silence to deal with, showed himself not less disposed than usual, when so challenged, to hold up, as he would have said, his end of it. They had, in general, in these days, longer pauses and more abrupt transitions; in one of which latter they found themselves, for a climax, launched at midnight. Mrs. Assingham, rather wearily housed again, ascended to the first floor, there to sink, overburdened, on the landing outside the drawing-room, into a great gilded Venetian chair — of which at first, however, she but made, with her brooding face, a sort of throne of meditation. She would thus have recalled a little, with her so free orientalism of type, the immemorially speechless Sphinx about at last to become articulate. The Colonel, not unlike, on his side, some old pilgrim of the desert camping at the foot of that monument, went, by way of reconnoissance, into the drawing-room. He visited, according to his wont, the windows and their fastenings; he cast round the place the eye, all at once, of the master and the manager, the commandant and the rate-payer; then he came back to his wife, before whom, for a moment, he stood waiting. But she herself, for a time, continued to wait, only looking up at him inscrutably. There was in these minor manoeuvres and conscious patiences something of a suspension of their old custom of divergent discussion, that intercourse by misunderstanding which had grown so clumsy now. This familiar pleasantry seemed to desire to show it could yield, on occasion, to any clear trouble; though it was also sensibly, and just incoherently, in the air that no trouble was at present to be vulgarly recognised as clear.

There might, for that matter, even have been in Mr. Assingham's face a mild perception of some finer sense — a sense for his wife's situation, and the very situation she was, oddly enough, about to repudiate — that she had fairly caused to grow in him. But it was a flower to breathe upon gently, and this was very much what she finally did. She knew he needed no telling that she had given herself, all the afternoon, to her friends in Eaton Square, and that her doing so would have been but the prompt result of impressions gathered, in quantities, in brimming baskets, like the purple grapes of the vintage, at Matcham; a process surrounded by him, while it so unmistakably went on, with abstentions and discretions that might almost have counted as solemnities. The solemnities, at the same time, had committed him to nothing — to nothing beyond this confession itself of a consciousness of deep waters. She had been out on these waters, for him, visibly; and his tribute to the fact had been his keeping her, even if without a word, well in sight. He had not quitted for an hour, during her adventure, the shore of the mystic lake; he had on the contrary stationed himself where she could signal to him at need. Her need would have arisen if the planks of her bark had parted — THEN some sort of plunge would have become his immediate duty. His present position, clearly, was that of seeing her in the centre of her sheet of dark water, and of wondering if her actual mute gaze at him didn't perhaps mean that her planks WERE now parting. He held himself so ready that it was quite as if the inward man had pulled off coat and waistcoat. Before he had plunged, however — that is before he had uttered a question — he perceived, not without relief, that she was making for land. He watched her steadily paddle, always a little nearer, and at last he felt her boat bump. The bump was distinct, and in fact she stepped ashore. "We were all wrong. There's nothing."

"Nothing — ?" It was like giving her his hand up the bank.

"Between Charlotte Verver and the Prince. I was uneasy — but I'm satisfied now. I was in fact quite mistaken. There's nothing."

"But I thought," said Bob Assingham, "that that was just what you did persistently asseverate. You've guaranteed their straightness from the first."

"No — I've never till now guaranteed anything but my own disposition to worry. I've never till now," Fanny went on gravely from her chair, "had such a chance to see and to judge. I had it at that place — if I had, in my infatuation and my folly," she added with expression, "nothing else. So I did see — I HAVE seen. And now I know." Her emphasis, as she repeated the word, made her head, in her seat of infallibility, rise

higher. “I know.”

The Colonel took it — but took it at first in silence. “Do you mean they’ve TOLD you — ?”

“No — I mean nothing so absurd. For in the first place I haven’t asked them, and in the second their word in such a matter wouldn’t count.”

“Oh,” said the Colonel with all his oddity, “they’d tell US.”

It made her face him an instant as with her old impatience of his short cuts, always across her finest flower-beds; but she felt, none the less, that she kept her irony down. “Then when they’ve told you, you’ll be perhaps so good as to let me know.”

He jerked up his chin, testing the growth of his beard with the back of his hand while he fixed her with a single eye. “Ah, I don’t say that they’d necessarily tell me that they ARE over the traces.”

“They’ll necessarily, whatever happens, hold their tongues, I hope, and I’m talking of them now as I take them for myself only. THAT’S enough for me — it’s all I have to regard.” With which, after an instant, “They’re wonderful,” said Fanny Assingham.

“Indeed,” her husband concurred, “I really think they are.”

“You’d think it still more if you knew. But you don’t know — because you don’t see. Their situation” — this was what he didn’t see— “is too extraordinary.”

“‘Too’?” He was willing to try.

“Too extraordinary to be believed, I mean, if one didn’t see. But just that, in a way, is what saves them. They take it seriously.”

He followed at his own pace. “Their situation?”

“The incredible side of it. They make it credible.”

“Credible then — you do say — to YOU?”

She looked at him again for an interval. “They believe in it themselves. They take it for what it is. And that,” she said, “saves them.”

“But if what it ‘is’ is just their chance — ?”

“It’s their chance for what I told you when Charlotte first turned up. It’s their chance for the idea that I was then sure she had.”

The Colonel showed his effort to recall. “Oh, your idea, at different moments, of any one of THEIR ideas!” This dim procession, visibly, mustered before him, and, with the best will in the world, he could but watch its immensity. “Are you speaking now of something to which you can comfortably settle down?”

Again, for a little, she only glowered at him. “I’ve come back to my belief, and that I have done so—”

“Well?” he asked as she paused.

“Well, shows that I’m right — for I assure you I had wandered far. Now I’m at home again, and I mean,” said Fanny Assingham, “to stay here. They’re beautiful,” she declared.

“The Prince and Charlotte?”

“The Prince and Charlotte. THAT’S how they’re so remarkable. And the beauty,” she explained, “is that they’re afraid for them. Afraid, I mean, for the others.”

“For Mr. Verver and Maggie?” It did take some following. “Afraid of what?”

“Afraid of themselves.”

The Colonel wondered. “Of THEMSELVES? Of Mr. Verver’s and Maggie’s selves?”

Mrs. Assingham remained patient as well as lucid. “Yes — of SUCH blindness too. But most of all of their own danger.”

He turned it over. “That danger BEING the blindness — ?”

“That danger being their position. What their position contains — of all the elements — I needn’t at this time of day attempt to tell you. It contains, luckily — for that’s the mercy — everything BUT blindness: I mean on their part. The blindness,” said Fanny, “is primarily her husband’s.”

He stood for a moment; he WOULD have it straight. “Whose husband’s?”

“Mr. Verver’s,” she went on. “The blindness is most of all his. That they feel — that they see. But it’s also his wife’s.”

“Whose wife’s?” he asked as she continued to gloom at him in a manner at variance with the comparative cheer of her contention. And then as she only gloomed: “The Prince’s?”

“Maggie’s own — Maggie’s very own,” she pursued as for herself.

He had a pause. “Do you think Maggie so blind?”

"The question isn't of what I think. The question's of the conviction that guides the Prince and Charlotte — who have better opportunities than I for judging."

The Colonel again wondered. "Are you so very sure their opportunities are better?"

"Well," his wife asked, "what is their whole so extraordinary situation, their extraordinary relation, but an opportunity?"

"Ah, my dear, you have that opportunity — of their extraordinary situation and relation — as much as they."

"With the difference, darling," she returned with some spirit, "that neither of those matters are, if you please, mine. I see the boat they're in, but I'm not, thank God, in it myself. To-day, however," Mrs. Assingham added, "to-day in Eaton Square I did see."

"Well then, what?"

But she mused over it still. "Oh, many things. More, somehow, than ever before. It was as if, God help me, I was seeing FOR them — I mean for the others. It was as if something had happened — I don't know what, except some effect of these days with them at that place — that had either made things come out or had cleared my own eyes." These eyes indeed of the poor lady's rested on her companion's, meanwhile, with the lustre not so much of intenser insight as of a particular portent that he had at various other times had occasion to recognise. She desired, obviously, to reassure him, but it apparently took a couple of large, candid, gathering, glittering tears to emphasise the fact. They had immediately, for him, their usual direct action: she must reassure him, he was made to feel, absolutely in her own way. He would adopt it and conform to it as soon as he should be able to make it out. The only thing was that it took such incalculable twists and turns. The twist seemed remarkable for instance as she developed her indication of what had come out in the afternoon. "It was as if I knew better than ever what makes them—"

"What makes them?" — he pressed her as she fitfully dropped.

"Well, makes the Prince and Charlotte take it all as they do. It might well have been difficult to know HOW to take it; and they may even say for themselves that they were a long time trying to see. As I say, to-day," she went on, "it was as if I were suddenly, with a kind of horrible push, seeing through their eyes." On which, as to shake off her perversity, Fanny Assingham sprang up. But she remained there, under the dim illumination, and while the Colonel, with his high, dry, spare look of "type," to which a certain conformity to the whiteness of inaccessible snows in his necktie, shirt-front and waistcoat gave a rigour of accent, waited, watching her, they might, at the late hour and in the still house, have been a pair of specious worldly adventurers, driven for relief, under sudden stress, to some grim midnight reckoning in an odd corner. Her attention moved mechanically over the objects of ornament disposed too freely on the walls of staircase and landing, as to which recognition, for the time, had lost both fondness and compunction. "I can imagine the way it works," she said; "it's so easy to understand. Yet I don't want to be wrong," she the next moment broke out "I don't, I don't want to be wrong!"

"To make a mistake, you mean?"

Oh no, she meant nothing of the sort; she knew but too well what she meant. "I don't make mistakes. But I perpetrate — in thought — crimes." And she spoke with all intensity. "I'm a most dreadful person. There are times when I seem not to mind a bit what I've done, or what I think or imagine or fear or accept; when I feel that I'd do it again — feel that I'd do things myself."

"Ah, my dear!" the Colonel remarked in the coolness of debate.

"Yes, if you had driven me back on my 'nature.' Luckily for you you never have. You've done every thing else, but you've never done that. But what I really don't a bit want," she declared, "is to abet them or to protect them."

Her companion turned this over. "What is there to protect them from? — if, by your now so settled faith, they've done nothing that justly exposes them."

And it in fact half pulled her up. "Well, from a sudden scare. From the alarm, I mean, of what Maggie MAY think."

"Yet if your whole idea is that Maggie thinks nothing — ?"

She waited again. "It isn't my 'whole' idea. Nothing is my 'whole' idea — for I felt to-day, as I tell you, that there's so much in the air."

"Oh, in the air — !" the Colonel dryly breathed.

"Well, what's in the air always HAS — hasn't it? — to come down to the earth. And Maggie," Mrs.

Assingham continued, “is a very curious little person. Since I was ‘in,’ this afternoon, for seeing more than I had ever done — well, I felt THAT too, for some reason, as I hadn’t yet felt it.”

“For ‘some’ reason? For what reason?” And then, as his wife at first said nothing: “Did she give any sign? Was she in any way different?”

“She’s always so different from anyone else in the world that it’s hard to say when she’s different from herself. But she has made me,” said Fanny after an instant, “think of her differently. She drove me home.”

“Home here?”

“First to Portland Place — on her leaving her father: since she does, once in a while, leave him. That was to keep me with her a little longer. But she kept the carriage and, after tea there, came with me herself back here. This was also for the same purpose. Then she went home, though I had brought her a message from the Prince that arranged their movements otherwise. He and Charlotte must have arrived — if they have arrived — expecting to drive together to Eaton Square and keep Maggie on to dinner there. She has everything there, you know — she has clothes.”

The Colonel didn’t in fact know, but he gave it his apprehension. “Oh, you mean a change?”

“Twenty changes, if you like — all sorts of things. She dresses, really, Maggie does, as much for her father — and she always did — as for her husband or for herself. She has her room in his house very much as she had it before she was married — and just as the boy has quite a second nursery there, in which Mrs. Noble, when she comes with him, makes herself, I assure you, at home. Si bien that if Charlotte, in her own house, so to speak, should wish a friend or two to stay with her, she really would be scarce able to put them up.”

It was a picture into which, as a thrifty entertainer himself, Bob Assingham could more or less enter. “Maggie and the child spread so?”

“Maggie and the child spread so.”

Well, he considered. “It IS rather rum,”

“That’s all I claim” — she seemed thankful for the word. “I don’t say it’s anything more — but it IS, distinctly, rum.”

Which, after an instant, the Colonel took up. “‘More’? What more COULD it be?”

“It could be that she’s unhappy, and that she takes her funny little way of consoling herself. For if she were unhappy” — Mrs. Assingham had figured it out— “that’s just the way, I’m convinced, she would take. But how can she be unhappy, since — as I’m also convinced — she, in the midst of everything, adores her husband as much as ever?”

The Colonel at this brooded for a little at large. “Then if she’s so happy, please what’s the matter?”

It made his wife almost spring at him. “You think then she’s secretly wretched?”

But he threw up his arms in deprecation. “Ah, my dear, I give them up to YOU. I’ve nothing more to suggest.”

“Then it’s not sweet of you.” She spoke at present as if he were frequently sweet. “You admit that it is ‘rum.’”

And this indeed fixed again, for a moment, his intention. “Has Charlotte complained of the want of rooms for her friends?”

“Never, that I know of, a word. It isn’t the sort of thing she does. And whom has she, after all,” Mrs. Assingham added, “to complain to?”

“Hasn’t she always you?”

“Oh, ‘me’! Charlotte and I, nowadays — !” She spoke as of a chapter closed. “Yet see the justice I still do her. She strikes me, more and more, as extraordinary.”

A deeper shade, at the renewal of the word, had come into the Colonel’s face. “If they’re each and all so extraordinary then, isn’t that why one must just resign one’s self to wash one’s hands of them — to be lost?” Her face, however, so met the question as if it were but a flicker of the old tone that their trouble had now become too real for — her charged eyes so betrayed the condition of her nerves that he stepped back, alertly enough, to firmer ground. He had spoken before in this light of a plain man’s vision, but he must be something more than a plain man now. “Hasn’t she then, Charlotte, always her husband — ?”

“To complain to? She’d rather die.”

“Oh!” — and Bob Assingham’s face, at the vision of such extremities, lengthened for very docility. “Hasn’t she the Prince then?”

“For such matters? Oh, he doesn’t count.”

"I thought that was just what — as the basis of our agitation — he does do!"

Mrs. Assingham, however, had her distinction ready. "Not a bit as a person to bore with complaints. The ground of MY agitation is, exactly, that she never on any pretext bores him. Not Charlotte!" And in the imagination of Mrs. Verver's superiority to any such mistake she gave, characteristically, something like a toss of her head — as marked a tribute to that lady's general grace, in all the conditions, as the personage referred to doubtless had ever received.

"Ah, only Maggie!" With which the Colonel gave a short low gurgle. But it found his wife again prepared.

"No — not only Maggie. A great many people in London — and small wonder! — bore him."

"Maggie only worst then?" But it was a question that he had promptly dropped at the returning brush of another, of which she had shortly before sown the seed. "You said just now that he would by this time be back with Charlotte 'if they HAVE arrived.' You think it then possible that they really won't have returned?"

His companion exhibited to view, for the idea, a sense of her responsibility; but this was insufficient, clearly, to keep her from entertaining it. "I think there's nothing they're not now capable of — in their so intense good faith."

"Good faith?" — he echoed the words, which had in fact something of an odd ring, critically.

"Their false position. It comes to the same thing." And she bore down, with her decision, the superficial lack of sequence. "They may very possibly, for a demonstration — as I see them — not have come back."

He wondered, visibly, at this, how she did see them. "May have bolted somewhere together?"

"May have stayed over at Matcham itself till tomorrow. May have wired home, each of them, since Maggie left me. May have done," Fanny Assingham continued, "God knows what!" She went on, suddenly, with more emotion — which, at the pressure of some spring of her inner vision, broke out in a wail of distress, imperfectly smothered. "Whatever they've done I shall never know. Never, never — because I don't want to, and because nothing will induce me. So they may do as they like. But I've worked for them ALL" She uttered this last with another irrepressible quaver, and the next moment her tears had come, though she had, with the explosion, quitted her husband as if to hide it from him. She passed into the dusky drawing-room, where, during his own prowl, shortly previous, he had drawn up a blind, so that the light of the street-lamps came in a little at the window. She made for this window, against which she leaned her head, while the Colonel, with his lengthened face, looked after her for a minute and hesitated. He might have been wondering what she had really done, to what extent, beyond his knowledge or his conception, in the affairs of these people, she COULD have committed herself. But to hear her cry, and yet try not to, was, quickly enough, too much for him; he had known her at other times quite not try not to, and that had not been so bad. He went to her and put his arm round her; he drew her head to his breast, where, while she gasped, she let it stay a little — all with a patience that presently stilled her. Yet the effect of this small crisis, oddly enough, was not to close their colloquy, with the natural result of sending them to bed: what was between them had opened out further, had somehow, through the sharp show of her feeling, taken a positive stride, had entered, as it were, without more words, the region of the understood, shutting the door after it and bringing them so still more nearly face to face. They remained for some minutes looking at it through the dim window which opened upon the world of human trouble in general and which let the vague light play here and there upon gilt and crystal and colour, the florid features, looming dimly, of Fanny's drawing-room. And the beauty of what thus passed between them, passed with her cry of pain, with her burst of tears, with his wonderment and his kindness and his comfort, with the moments of their silence, above all, which might have represented their sinking together, hand in hand, for a time, into the mystic lake where he had begun, as we have hinted, by seeing her paddle alone — the beauty of it was that they now could really talk better than before, because the basis had at last, once for all, defined itself. What was the basis, which Fanny absolutely exacted, but that Charlotte and the Prince must be saved — so far as consistently speaking of them as still safe might save them? It did save them, somehow, for Fanny's troubled mind — for that was the nature of the mind of women. He conveyed to her now, at all events, by refusing her no gentleness, that he had sufficiently got the tip, and that the tip was all he had wanted. This remained quite clear even when he presently reverted to what she had told him of her recent passage with Maggie. "I don't altogether see, you know, what you infer from it, or why you infer anything." When he so expressed himself it was quite as if in possession of what they had brought up from the depths.

XXIV

"I can't say more," this made his companion reply, "than that something in her face, her voice and her whole manner acted upon me as nothing in her had ever acted before; and just for the reason, above all, that I felt her trying her very best — and her very best, poor duck, is very good — to be quiet and natural. It's when one sees people who always ARE natural making little pale, pathetic, blinking efforts for it — then it is that one knows something's the matter. I can't describe my impression — you would have had it for yourself. And the only thing that ever CAN be the matter with Maggie is that. By 'that' I mean her beginning to doubt. To doubt, for the first time," Mrs. Assingham wound up, "of her wonderful little judgment of her wonderful little world."

It was impressive, Fanny's vision, and the Colonel, as if himself agitated by it, took another turn of prowling. "To doubt of fidelity — to doubt of friendship! Poor duck indeed! It will go hard with her. But she'll put it all," he concluded, "on Charlotte."

Mrs. Assingham, still darkly contemplative, denied this with a headshake. "She won't 'put' it anywhere. She won't do with it anything anyone else would. She'll take it all herself."

"You mean she'll make it out her own fault?"

"Yes — she'll find means, somehow, to arrive at that."

"Ah then," the Colonel dutifully declared, "she's indeed a little brick!"

"Oh," his wife returned, "you'll see, in one way or another, to what tune!" And she spoke, of a sudden, with an approach to elation — so that, as if immediately feeling his surprise, she turned round to him. "She'll see me somehow through!"

"See YOU — ?"

"Yes, me. I'm the worst. For," said Fanny Assingham, now with a harder exaltation, "I did it all. I recognise that — I accept it. She won't cast it up at me — she won't cast up anything. So I throw myself upon her — she'll bear me up." She spoke almost volubly — she held him with her sudden sharpness. "She'll carry the whole weight of us."

There was still, nevertheless, wonder in it. "You mean she won't mind? I SAY, love — !" And he not unkindly stared. "Then where's the difficulty?"

"There isn't any!" Fanny declared with the same rich emphasis. It kept him indeed, as by the loss of the thread, looking at her longer. "Ah, you mean there isn't any for US!"

She met his look for a minute as if it perhaps a little too much imputed a selfishness, a concern, at any cost, for their own surface. Then she might have been deciding that their own surface was, after all, what they had most to consider. "Not," she said with dignity, "if we properly keep our heads." She appeared even to signify that they would begin by keeping them now. This was what it was to have at last a constituted basis. "Do you remember what you said to me that night of my first REAL anxiety — after the Foreign Office party?"

"In the carriage — as we came home?" Yes — he could recall it. "Leave them to pull through?"

"Precisely. 'Trust their own wit,' you practically said, 'to save all appearances.' Well, I've trusted it. I HAVE left them to pull through."

He hesitated. "And your point is that they're not doing so?"

"I've left them," she went on, "but now I see how and where. I've been leaving them all the while, without knowing it, to HER."

"To the Princess?"

"And that's what I mean," Mrs. Assingham pensively pursued. "That's what happened to me with her to-day," she continued to explain. "It came home to me that that's what I've really been doing."

"Oh, I see."

"I needn't torment myself. She has taken them over."

The Colonel declared that he "saw"; yet it was as if, at this, he a little sightlessly stared. "But what then has happened, from one day to the other, to HER? What has opened her eyes?"

"They were never really shut. She misses him."

"Then why hasn't she missed him before?"

Well, facing him there, among their domestic glooms and glints, Fanny worked it out. "She did — but she wouldn't let herself know it. She had her reason — she wore her blind. Now, at last, her situation has come to

a head. To-day she does know it. And that's illuminating. It has been," Mrs. Assingham wound up, "illuminating to ME."

Her husband attended, but the momentary effect of his attention was vagueness again, and the refuge of his vagueness was a gasp. "Poor dear little girl!"

"Ah no — don't pity her!"

This did, however, pull him up. "We mayn't even be sorry for her?"

"Not now — or at least not yet. It's too soon — that is if it isn't very much too late. This will depend," Mrs. Assingham went on; "at any rate we shall see. We might have pitied her before — for all the good it would then have done her; we might have begun some time ago. Now, however, she has begun to live. And the way it comes to me, the way it comes to me—" But again she projected her vision.

"The way it comes to you can scarcely be that she'll like it!"

"The way it comes to me is that she will live. The way it comes to me is that she'll triumph."

She said this with so sudden a prophetic flare that it fairly cheered her husband. "Ah then, we must back her!"

"No — we mustn't touch her. We mayn't touch any of them. We must keep our hands off; we must go on tiptoe. We must simply watch and wait. And meanwhile," said Mrs. Assingham, "we must bear it as we can. That's where we are — and serves us right. We're in presence."

And so, moving about the room as in communion with shadowy portents, she left it till he questioned again. "In presence of what?"

"Well, of something possibly beautiful. Beautiful as it MAY come off."

She had paused there before him while he wondered. "You mean she'll get the Prince back?"

She raised her hand in quick impatience: the suggestion might have been almost abject. "It isn't a question of recovery. It won't be a question of any vulgar struggle. To 'get him back' she must have lost him, and to have lost him she must have had him." With which Fanny shook her head. "What I take her to be waking up to is the truth that, all the while, she really HASN'T had him. Never."

"Ah, my dear — !" the poor Colonel panted.

"Never!" his wife repeated. And she went on without pity. "Do you remember what I said to you long ago — that evening, just before their marriage, when Charlotte had so suddenly turned up?"

The smile with which he met this appeal was not, it was to be feared, robust. "What haven't you, love, said in your time?"

"So many things, no doubt, that they make a chance for my having once or twice spoken the truth. I never spoke it more, at all events, than when I put it to you, that evening, that Maggie was the person in the world to whom a wrong thing could least be communicated. It was as if her imagination had been closed to it, her sense altogether sealed, That therefore," Fanny continued, "is what will now HAVE to happen. Her sense will have to open."

"I see." He nodded. "To the wrong." He nodded again, almost cheerfully — as if he had been keeping the peace with a baby or a lunatic. "To the very, very wrong."

But his wife's spirit, after its effort of wing, was able to remain higher. "To what's called Evil — with a very big E: for the first time in her life. To the discovery of it, to the knowledge of it, to the crude experience of it." And she gave, for the possibility, the largest measure. "To the harsh, bewildering brush, the daily chilling breath of it. Unless indeed" — and here Mrs. Assingham noted a limit "unless indeed, as yet (so far as she has come, and if she comes no further), simply to the suspicion and the dread. What we shall see is whether that mere dose of alarm will prove enough."

He considered. "But enough for what then, dear — if not enough to break her heart?"

"Enough to give her a shaking!" Mrs. Assingham rather oddly replied. "To give her, I mean, the right one. The right one won't break her heart. It will make her," she explained— "well, it will make her, by way of a change, understand one or two things in the world."

"But isn't it a pity," the Colonel asked, "that they should happen to be the one or two that will be the most disagreeable to her?"

"Oh, 'disagreeable' — ? They'll have had to be disagreeable — to show her a little where she is. They'll have HAD to be disagreeable to make her sit up. They'll have had to be disagreeable to make her decide to live."

Bob Assingham was now at the window, while his companion slowly revolved; he had lighted a cigarette,

for final patience, and he seemed vaguely to "time" her as she moved to and fro. He had at the same time to do justice to the lucidity she had at last attained, and it was doubtless by way of expression of this teachability that he let his eyes, for a minute, roll, as from the force of feeling, over the upper dusk of the room. He had thought of the response his wife's words ideally implied.

"Decide to live — ah yes! — for her child."

"Oh, bother her child!" — and he had never felt so snubbed, for an exemplary view, as when Fanny now stopped short. "To live, you poor dear, for her father — which is another pair of sleeves!"

And Mrs. Assingham's whole ample, ornamented person irradiated, with this, the truth that had begun, under so much handling, to glow. "Any idiot can do things for her child. She'll have a motive more original, and we shall see how it will work her. She'll have to save HIM."

"To 'save' him — ?"

"To keep her father from her own knowledge. THAT" — and she seemed to see it, before her, in her husband's very eyes— "will be work cut out!" With which, as at the highest conceivable climax, she wound up their colloquy. "Good night!"

There was something in her manner, however — or in the effect, at least, of this supreme demonstration that had fairly, and by a single touch, lifted him to her side; so that, after she had turned her back to regain the landing and the staircase, he overtook her, before she had begun to mount, with the ring of excited perception. "Ah, but, you know, that's rather jolly!"

"Jolly' — ?" she turned upon it, again, at the foot of the staircase.

"I mean it's rather charming."

"'Charming' — ?" It had still to be their law, a little, that she was tragic when he was comic.

"I mean it's rather beautiful. You just said, yourself, it would be. Only," he pursued promptly, with the impetus of this idea, and as if it had suddenly touched with light for him connections hitherto dim— "only I don't quite see why that very care for him which has carried her to such other lengths, precisely, as affect one as so 'rum,' hasn't also, by the same stroke, made her notice a little more what has been going on."

"Ah, there you are! It's the question that I've all along been asking myself." She had rested her eyes on the carpet, but she raised them as she pursued — she let him have it straight. "And it's the question of an idiot."

"An idiot — ?"

"Well, the idiot that I'VE been, in all sorts of ways — so often, of late, have I asked it. You're excusable, since you ask it but now. The answer, I saw to-day, has all the while been staring me in the face."

"Then what in the world is it?"

"Why, the very intensity of her conscience about him — the very passion of her brave little piety. That's the way it has worked," Mrs. Assingham explained "and I admit it to have been as 'rum' a way as possible. But it has been working from a rum start. From the moment the dear man married to ease his daughter off, and it then happened, by an extraordinary perversity, that the very opposite effect was produced — !" With the renewed vision of this fatality, however, she could give but a desperate shrug.

"I see," the Colonel sympathetically mused. "That WAS a rum start."

But his very response, as she again flung up her arms, seemed to make her sense, for a moment, intolerable. "Yes — there I am! I was really at the bottom of it," she declared; "I don't know what possessed me — but I planned for him, I goaded him on." With which, however, the next moment, she took herself up. "Or, rather, I DO know what possessed me — for wasn't he beset with ravening women, right and left, and didn't he, quite pathetically, appeal for protection, didn't he, quite charmingly, show one how he needed and desired it? Maggie," she thus lucidly continued, "couldn't, with a new life of her own, give herself up to doing for him in the future all she had done in the past — to fencing him in, to keeping him safe and keeping THEM off. One perceived this," she went on— "out of the abundance of one's affection and one's sympathy." It all blessedly came back to her — when it wasn't all, for the fiftieth time, obscured, in face of the present facts, by anxiety and compunction. "One was no doubt a meddlesome fool; one always IS, to think one sees people's lives for them better than they see them for themselves. But one's excuse here," she insisted, "was that these people clearly DIDN'T see them for themselves — didn't see them at all. It struck one for very pity — that they were making a mess of such charming material; that they were but wasting it and letting it go. They didn't know HOW to live — and somehow one couldn't, if one took an interest in them at all, simply stand and see it. That's what I pay for" — and the poor woman, in straighter communion with her companion's intelligence at this moment, she appeared to feel, than she had ever been before, let him

have the whole of the burden of her consciousness. “I always pay for it, sooner or later, my sociable, my damnable, my unnecessary interest. Nothing of course would suit me but that it should fix itself also on Charlotte — Charlotte who was hovering there on the edge of our lives, when not beautifully, and a trifle mysteriously, flitting across them, and who was a piece of waste and a piece of threatened failure, just as, for any possible good to the WORLD, Mr. Verver and Maggie were. It began to come over me, in the watches of the night, that Charlotte was a person who COULD keep off ravening women — without being one herself, either, in the vulgar way of the others; and that this service to Mr. Verver would be a sweet employment for her future. There was something, of course, that might have stopped me: you know, you know what I mean — it looks at me,” she veritably moaned, “out of your face! But all I can say is that it didn’t; the reason largely being — once I had fallen in love with the beautiful symmetry of my plan — that I seemed to feel sure Maggie would accept Charlotte, whereas I didn’t quite make out either what other woman, or what other KIND of woman, one could think of her accepting.”

“I see — I see.” She had paused, meeting all the while his listening look, and the fever of her retrospect had so risen with her talk that the desire was visibly strong in him to meet her, on his side, but with cooling breath. “One quite understands, my dear.”

It only, however, kept her there sombre. “I naturally see, love, what you understand; which sits again, perfectly, in your eyes. You see that I saw that Maggie would accept her in helpless ignorance. Yes, dearest” — and the grimness of her dreariness suddenly once more possessed her: “you’ve only to tell me that that knowledge was my reason for what I did. How, when you do, can I stand up to you? You see,” she said with an ineffable headshake, “that I don’t stand up! I’m down, down, down,” she declared; “yet” she as quickly added— “there’s just one little thing that helps to save my life.” And she kept him waiting but an instant. “They might easily — they would perhaps even certainly — have done something worse.”

He thought. “Worse than that Charlotte — ?”

“Ah, don’t tell me,” she cried, “that there COULD have been nothing worse. There might, as they were, have been many things. Charlotte, in her way, is extraordinary.”

He was almost simultaneous. “Extraordinary!”

“She observes the forms,” said Fanny Assingham.

He hesitated. “With the Prince — ?”

“FOR the Prince. And with the others,” she went on. “With Mr. Verver — wonderfully. But above all with Maggie. And the forms” — she had to do even THEM justice— “are two-thirds of conduct. Say he had married a woman who would have made a hash of them.”

But he jerked back. “Ah, my dear, I wouldn’t say it for the world!”

“Say,” she none the less pursued, “he had married a woman the Prince would really have cared for.”

“You mean then he doesn’t care for Charlotte — ?” This was still a new view to jump to, and the Colonel, perceptibly, wished to make sure of the necessity of the effort. For that, while he stared, his wife allowed him time; at the end of which she simply said: “No!”

“Then what on earth are they up to?” Still, however, she only looked at him; so that, standing there before her with his hands in his pockets, he had time, further, to risk, soothingly, another question. “Are the ‘forms’ you speak of — that are two-thirds of conduct — what will be keeping her now, by your hypothesis, from coming home with him till morning?”

“Yes — absolutely. THEIR forms.”

“‘Theirs’ — ?”

“Maggie’s and Mr. Verver’s — those they IMPOSE on Charlotte and the Prince. Those,” she developed, “that, so perversely, as I say, have succeeded in setting themselves up as the right ones.”

He considered — but only now, at last, really to relapse into woe. “Your ‘perversity,’ my dear, is exactly what I don’t understand. The state of things existing hasn’t grown, like a field of mushrooms, in a night. Whatever they, all round, may be in for now is at least the consequence of what they’ve DONE. Are they mere helpless victims of fate?”

Well, Fanny at last had the courage of it, “Yes — they are. To be so abjectly innocent — that IS to be victims of fate.”

“And Charlotte and the Prince are abjectly innocent — ?”

It took her another minute, but she rose to the full height. “Yes. That is they WERE — as much so in their way as the others. There were beautiful intentions all round. The Prince’s and Charlotte’s were beautiful — of

THAT I had my faith. They WERE — I'd go to the stake. Otherwise," she added, "I should have been a wretch. And I've not been a wretch. I've only been a double-dyed donkey."

"Ah then," he asked, "what does our muddle make THEM to have been?"

"Well, too much taken up with considering each other. You may call such a mistake as that by what ever name you please; it at any rate means, all round, their case. It illustrates the misfortune," said Mrs. Assingham gravely, "of being too, too charming."

This was another matter that took some following, but the Colonel again did his best. "Yes, but to whom? — doesn't it rather depend on that? To whom have the Prince and Charlotte then been too charming?"

"To each other, in the first place — obviously. And then both of them together to Maggie."

"To Maggie?" he wonderingly echoed.

"To Maggie." She was now crystalline. "By having accepted, from the first, so guilelessly — yes, so guilelessly, themselves — her guileless idea of still having her father, of keeping him fast, in her life."

"Then isn't one supposed, in common humanity, and if one hasn't quarrelled with him, and one has the means, and he, on his side, doesn't drink or kick up rows — isn't one supposed to keep one's aged parent in one's life?"

"Certainly — when there aren't particular reasons against it. That there may be others than his getting drunk is exactly the moral of what is before us. In the first place Mr. Verver isn't aged."

The Colonel just hung fire — but it came. "Then why the deuce does he — oh, poor dear man! — behave as if he were?"

She took a moment to meet it. "How do you know how he behaves?"

"Well, my own love, we see how Charlotte does!" Again, at this, she faltered; but again she rose. "Ah, isn't my whole point that he's charming to her?"

"Doesn't it depend a bit on what she regards as charming?"

She faced the question as if it were flippant, then with a headshake of dignity she brushed it away. "It's Mr. Verver who's really young — it's Charlotte who's really old. And what I was saying," she added, "isn't affected!"

"You were saying" — he did her the justice— "that they're all guileless."

"That they were. Guileless, all, at first — quite extraordinarily. It's what I mean by their failure to see that the more they took for granted they could work together the more they were really working apart. For I repeat," Fanny went on, "that I really believe Charlotte and the Prince honestly to have made up their minds, originally, that their very esteem for Mr. Verver — which was serious, as well it might be! — would save them."

"I see." The Colonel inclined himself. "And save HIM."

"It comes to the same thing!"

"Then save Maggie."

"That comes," said Mrs. Assingham, "to something a little different. For Maggie has done the most."

He wondered. "What do you call the most?"

"Well, she did it originally — she began the vicious circle. For that — though you make round eyes at my associating her with 'vice' — is simply what it has been. It's their mutual consideration, all round, that has made it the bottomless gulf; and they're really so embroiled but because, in their way, they've been so improbably GOOD."

"In their way — yes!" the Colonel grinned.

"Which was, above all, Maggie's way." No flicker of his ribaldry was anything to her now. "Maggie had in the first place to make up to her father for her having suffered herself to become — poor little dear, as she believed — so intensely married. Then she had to make up to her husband for taking so much of the time they might otherwise have spent together to make this reparation to Mr. Verver perfect. And her way to do this, precisely, was by allowing the Prince the use, the enjoyment, whatever you may call it, of Charlotte to cheer his path — by instalments, as it were — in proportion as she herself, making sure her father was all right, might be missed from his side. By so much, at the same time, however," Mrs. Assingham further explained, "by so much as she took her young stepmother, for this purpose, away from Mr. Verver, by just so much did this too strike her as something again to be made up for. It has saddled her, you will easily see, with a positively new obligation to her father, an obligation created and aggravated by her unfortunate, even if quite heroic, little sense of justice. She began with wanting to show him that his marriage could never, under

whatever temptation of her own bliss with the Prince, become for her a pretext for deserting or neglecting HIM. Then that, in its order, entailed her wanting to show the Prince that she recognised how the other desire — this wish to remain, intensely, the same passionate little daughter she had always been — involved in some degree, and just for the present, so to speak, her neglecting and deserting him. I quite hold," Fanny with characteristic amplitude parenthesised, "that a person can mostly feel but one passion — one TENDER passion, that is — at a time. Only, that doesn't hold good for our primary and instinctive attachments, the 'voice of blood,' such as one's feeling for a parent or a brother. Those may be intense and yet not prevent other intensities — as you will recognise, my dear, when you remember how I continued, tout betement, to adore my mother, whom you didn't adore, for years after I had begun to adore you. Well, Maggie" — she kept it up— "is in the same situation as I was, PLUS complications from which I was, thank heaven, exempt: PLUS the complication, above all, of not having in the least begun with the sense for complications that I should have had. Before she knew it, at any rate, her little scruples and her little lucidities, which were really so divinely blind — her feverish little sense of justice, as I say — had brought the two others together as her grossest misconduct couldn't have done. And now she knows something or other has happened — yet hasn't heretofore known what. She has only piled up her remedy, poor child — something that she has earnestly but confusedly seen as her necessary policy; piled it on top of the policy, on top of the remedy, that she at first thought out for herself, and that would really have needed, since then, so much modification. Her only modification has been the growth of her necessity to prevent her father's wondering if all, in their life in common, MAY be so certainly for the best. She has now as never before to keep him unconscious that, peculiar, if he makes a point of it, as their situation is, there's anything in it all uncomfortable or disagreeable, anything morally the least out of the way. She has to keep touching it up to make it, each day, each month, look natural and normal to him; so that — God forgive me the comparison! — she's like an old woman who has taken to 'painting' and who has to lay it on thicker, to carry it off with a greater audacity, with a greater impudence even, the older she grows." And Fanny stood a moment captivated with the image she had thrown off. "I like the idea of Maggie audacious and impudent — learning to be so to gloss things over. She could — she even will, yet, I believe — learn it, for that sacred purpose, consummately, diabolically. For from the moment the dear man should see it's all rouge — !" She paused, staring at the vision.

It imparted itself even to Bob. "Then the fun would begin?" As it but made her look at him hard, however, he amended the form of his inquiry. "You mean that in that case she WILL, charming creature, be lost?"

She was silent a moment more. "As I've told you before, she won't be lost if her father's saved. She'll see that as salvation enough."

The Colonel took it in. "Then she's a little heroine."

"Rather — she's a little heroine. But it's his innocence, above all," Mrs. Assingham added, "that will pull them through."

Her companion, at this, focussed again Mr. Verver's innocence. "It's awfully quaint."

"Of course it's awfully quaint! That it's awfully quaint, that the pair are awfully quaint, quaint with all our dear old quaintness — by which I don't mean yours and mine, but that of my own sweet countrypeople, from whom I've so deplorably degenerated — that," Mrs. Assingham declared, "was originally the head and front of their appeal to me and of my interest in them. And of course I shall feel them quainter still," she rather ruefully subjoined, "before they've done with me!"

This might be, but it wasn't what most stood in the Colonel's way. "You believe so in Mr. Verver's innocence after two years of Charlotte?"

She stared. "But the whole point is just that two years of Charlotte are what he hasn't really — or what you may call undividedly — had."

"Any more than Maggie, by your theory, eh, has 'really or undividedly,' had four of the Prince? It takes all she hasn't had," the Colonel conceded, "to account for the innocence that in her, too, so leaves us in admiration."

So far as it might be ribald again she let this pass. "It takes a great many things to account for Maggie. What is definite, at all events, is that — strange though this be — her effort for her father has, up to now, sufficiently succeeded. She has made him, she makes him, accept the tolerably obvious oddity of their relation, all round, for part of the game. Behind her there, protected and amused and, as it were, exquisitely humbugged — the Principino, in whom he delights, always aiding — he has safely and serenely enough suffered the conditions of his life to pass for those he had sublimely projected. He hadn't worked them out in

detail — any more than I had, heaven pity me! — and the queerness has been, exactly, in the detail. This, for him, is what it was to have married Charlotte. And they both," she neatly wound up, "'help.'"

"'Both' — ?"

"I mean that if Maggie, always in the breach, makes it seem to him all so flourishingly to fit, Charlotte does her part not less. And her part is very large. Charlotte," Fanny declared, "works like a horse."

So there it all was, and her husband looked at her a minute across it. "And what does the Prince work like?"

She fixed him in return. "Like a Prince!" Whereupon, breaking short off, to ascend to her room, she presented her highly — decorated back — in which, in odd places, controlling the complications of its aspect, the ruby or the garnet, the turquoise and the topaz, gleamed like faint symbols of the wit that pinned together the satin patches of her argument.

He watched her as if she left him positively under the impression of her mastery of her subject; yes, as if the real upshot of the drama before them was but that he had, when it came to the tight places of life — as life had shrunk for him now — the most luminous of wives. He turned off, in this view of her majestic retreat, the comparatively faint little electric lamp which had presided over their talk; then he went up as immediately behind her as the billows of her amber train allowed, making out how all the clearness they had conquered was even for herself a relief — how at last the sense of the amplitude of her exposition sustained and floated her. Joining her, however, on the landing above, where she had already touched a metallic point into light, he found she had done perhaps even more to create than to extinguish in him the germ of a curiosity. He held her a minute longer — there was another plum in the pie. "What did you mean some minutes ago by his not caring for Charlotte?"

"The Prince's? By his not 'really' caring?" She recalled, after a little, benevolently enough. "I mean that men don't, when it has all been too easy. That's how, in nine cases out of ten, a woman is treated who has risked her life. You asked me just now how he works," she added; "but you might better perhaps have asked me how he plays."

Well, he made it up. "Like a Prince?"

"Like a Prince. He is, profoundly, a Prince. For that," she said with expression, "he's — beautifully — a case. They're far rarer, even in the 'highest circles,' than they pretend to be — and that's what makes so much of his value. He's perhaps one of the very last — the last of the real ones. So it is we must take him. We must take him all round."

The Colonel considered. "And how must Charlotte — if anything happens — take him?"

The question held her a minute, and while she waited, with her eyes on him, she put out a grasping hand to his arm, in the flesh of which he felt her answer distinctly enough registered. Thus she gave him, standing off a little, the firmest, longest, deepest injunction he had ever received from her. "Nothing — in spite of everything — WILL happen. Nothing HAS happened. Nothing IS happening."

He looked a trifle disappointed. "I see. For US."

"For us. For whom else?" And he was to feel indeed how she wished him to understand it. "We know nothing on earth — !" It was an undertaking he must sign.

So he wrote, as it were, his name. "We know nothing on earth." It was like the soldiers' watchword at night.

"We're as innocent," she went on in the same way, "as babes."

"Why not rather say," he asked, "as innocent as they themselves are?"

"Oh, for the best of reasons! Because we're much more so."

He wondered. "But how can we be more — ?"

"For them? Oh, easily! We can be anything."

"Absolute idiots then?"

"Absolute idiots. And oh," Fanny breathed, "the way it will rest us!"

Well, he looked as if there were something in that. "But won't they know we're not?"

She barely hesitated. "Charlotte and the Prince think we are — which is so much gained. Mr. Verver believes in our intelligence — but he doesn't matter."

"And Maggie? Doesn't SHE know — ?"

"That we see before our noses?" Yes, this indeed took longer. "Oh, so far as she may guess it she'll give no sign. So it comes to the same thing."

He raised his eyebrows. “Comes to our not being able to help her?”

“That’s the way we SHALL help her.”

“By looking like fools?”

She threw up her hands. “She only wants, herself, to look like a bigger! So there we are!” With which she brushed it away — his conformity was promised. Something, however, still held her; it broke, to her own vision, as a last wave of clearness. “Moreover NOW,” she said, “I see! I mean,” she added,— “what you were asking me: how I knew to-day, in Eaton Square, that Maggie’s awake.” And she had indeed visibly got it. “It was by seeing them together.”

“Seeing her with her father?” He fell behind again. “But you’ve seen her often enough before.”

“Never with my present eyes. For nothing like such a test — that of this length of the others’ absence together — has hitherto occurred.”

“Possibly! But if she and Mr. Verver insisted upon it — ?”

“Why is it such a test? Because it has become one without their intending it. It has spoiled, so to speak, on their hands.”

“It has soured, eh?” the Colonel said.

“The word’s horrible — say rather it has ‘changed.’ Perhaps,” Fanny went on, “she did wish to see how much she can bear. In that case she HAS seen. Only it was she alone who — about the visit — insisted. Her father insists on nothing. And she watches him do it.”

Her husband looked impressed. “Watches him?”

“For the first faint sign. I mean of his noticing. It doesn’t, as I tell you, come. But she’s there for it to see. And I felt,” she continued, “HOW she’s there; I caught her, as it were, in the fact. She couldn’t keep it from me — though she left her post on purpose — came home with me to throw dust in my eyes. I took it all — her dust; but it was what showed me.” With which supreme lucidity she reached the door of her room. “Luckily it showed me also how she has succeeded. Nothing — from him — HAS come.”

“You’re so awfully sure?”

“Sure. Nothing WILL. Good-night,” she said. “She’ll die first.”

BOOK SECOND: THE PRINCESS

PART FOURTH

XXV

It was not till many days had passed that the Princess began to accept the idea of having done, a little, something she was not always doing, or indeed that of having listened to any inward voice that spoke in a new tone. Yet these instinctive postponements of reflection were the fruit, positively, of recognitions and perceptions already active; of the sense, above all, that she had made, at a particular hour, made by the mere touch of her hand, a difference in the situation so long present to her as practically unattackable. This situation had been occupying, for months and months, the very centre of the garden of her life, but it had reared itself there like some strange, tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful, beautiful, but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard, bright porcelain, coloured and figured and adorned, at the overhanging eaves, with silver bells that tinkled, ever so charmingly, when stirred by chance airs. She had walked round and round it — that was what she felt; she had carried on her existence in the space left her for circulation, a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow: looking up, all the while, at the fair structure that spread itself so amply and rose so high, but never quite making out, as yet, where she might have entered had she wished. She had not wished till now — such was the odd case; and what was doubtless equally odd, besides, was that, though her raised eyes seemed to distinguish places that must serve, from within, and especially far aloft, as apertures and outlooks, no door appeared to give access from her convenient garden level. The great decorated surface had remained consistently impenetrable and inscrutable. At present, however, to her considering mind, it was as if she had ceased merely to circle and to scan the elevation, ceased so vaguely, so quite helplessly to stare and wonder: she had caught herself distinctly in the act of pausing, then in that of lingering, and finally in that of stepping unprecedentedly near. The thing might have been, by the distance at which it kept her, a Mahometan mosque, with which no base heretic could take a liberty; there so hung about it the vision of one's putting off one's shoes to enter, and even, verily, of one's paying with one's life if found there as an interloper. She had not, certainly, arrived at the conception of paying with her life for anything she might do; but it was nevertheless quite as if she had sounded with a tap or two one of the rare porcelain plates. She had knocked, in short — though she could scarce have said whether for admission or for what; she had applied her hand to a cool smooth spot and had waited to see what would happen. Something had happened; it was as if a sound, at her touch, after a little, had come back to her from within; a sound sufficiently suggesting that her approach had been noted.

If this image, however, may represent our young woman's consciousness of a recent change in her life — a change now but a few days old — it must at the same time be observed that she both sought and found in renewed circulation, as I have called it, a measure of relief from the idea of having perhaps to answer for what she had done. The pagoda in her blooming garden figured the arrangement — how otherwise was it to be named? — by which, so strikingly, she had been able to marry without breaking, as she liked to put it, with the past. She had surrendered herself to her husband without the shadow of a reserve or a condition, and yet she had not, all the while, given up her father — the least little inch. She had compassed the high city of seeing the two men beautifully take to each other, and nothing in her marriage had marked it as more happy than this fact of its having practically given the elder, the lonelier, a new friend. What had moreover all the while enriched the whole aspect of success was that the latter's marriage had been no more meassurably paid for than her own. His having taken the same great step in the same free way had not in the least involved the relegation of his daughter. That it was remarkable they should have been able at once so to separate and so to keep together had never for a moment, from however far back, been equivocal to her; that it was remarkable had in fact quite counted, at first and always, and for each of them equally, as part of their inspiration and their support. There were plenty of singular things they were NOT enamoured of — flights of brilliancy, of audacity, of originality, that, speaking at least for the dear man and herself, were not at all in their line; but they liked to think they had given their life this unusual extension and this liberal form, which many families, many couples, and still more many pairs of couples, would not have found workable. That last truth had been distinctly brought home to them by the bright testimony, the quite explicit envy, of most of their friends, who had remarked to them again and again that they must, on all the showing, to keep on such terms, be people of the highest amiability — equally including in the praise, of course, Amerigo and Charlotte. It had given them pleasure — as how should it not? — to find themselves shed such a glamour; it had certainly, that is, given pleasure to her father and herself, both of them distinguishably of a nature so slow to presume that they would scarce have been sure of their triumph without this pretty reflection of it. So it was that their felicity had

fructified; so it was that the ivory tower, visible and admirable doubtless, from any point of the social field, had risen stage by stage. Maggie's actual reluctance to ask herself with proportionate sharpness why she had ceased to take comfort in the sight of it represented accordingly a lapse from that ideal consistency on which her moral comfort almost at any time depended. To remain consistent she had always been capable of cutting down more or less her prior term.

Moving for the first time in her life as in the darkening shadow of a false position, she reflected that she should either not have ceased to be right — that is, to be confident — or have recognised that she was wrong; though she tried to deal with herself, for a space, only as a silken-coated spaniel who has scrambled out of a pond and who rattles the water from his ears. Her shake of her head, again and again, as she went, was much of that order, and she had the resource, to which, save for the rude equivalent of his generalising bark, the spaniel would have been a stranger, of humming to herself hard as a sign that nothing had happened to her. She had not, so to speak, fallen in; she had had no accident and had not got wet; this at any rate was her pretension until after she began a little to wonder if she mightn't, with or without exposure, have taken cold. She could at all events remember no time at which she had felt so excited, and certainly none — which was another special point — that so brought with it as well the necessity for concealing excitement. This birth of a new eagerness became a high pastime, in her view, precisely by reason of the ingenuity required for keeping the thing born out of sight. The ingenuity was thus a private and absorbing exercise, in the light of which, might I so far multiply my metaphors, I should compare her to the frightened but clinging young mother of an unlawful child. The idea that had possession of her would be, by our new analogy, the proof of her misadventure, but likewise, all the while, only another sign of a relation that was more to her than anything on earth. She had lived long enough to make out for herself that any deep-seated passion has its pangs as well as its joys, and that we are made by its aches and its anxieties most richly conscious of it. She had never doubted of the force of the feeling that bound her to her husband; but to become aware, almost suddenly, that it had begun to vibrate with a violence that had some of the effect of a strain would, rightly looked at, after all but show that she was, like thousands of women, every day, acting up to the full privilege of passion. Why in the world shouldn't she, with every right — if, on consideration, she saw no good reason against it? The best reason against it would have been the possibility of some consequence disagreeable or inconvenient to others — especially to such others as had never incommoded her by the egotism of THEIR passions; but if once that danger were duly guarded against the fulness of one's measure amounted to no more than the equal use of one's faculties or the proper playing of one's part. It had come to the Princess, obscurely at first, but little by little more conceivably, that her faculties had not for a good while been concomitantly used; the case resembled in a manner that of her once-loved dancing, a matter of remembered steps that had grown vague from her ceasing to go to balls. She would go to balls again — that seemed, freely, even crudely, stated, the remedy; she would take out of the deep receptacles in which she had laid them away the various ornaments congruous with the greater occasions, and of which her store, she liked to think, was none of the smallest. She would have been easily to be figured for us at this occupation; dipping, at off moments and quiet hours, in snatched visits and by draughty candle-light, into her rich collections and seeing her jewels again a little shyly, but all unmistakably, glow. That in fact may pass as the very picture of her semi-smothered agitation, of the diversion she to some extent successfully found in referring her crisis, so far as was possible, to the mere working of her own needs.

It must be added, however, that she would have been at a loss to determine — and certainly at first — to which order, that of self-control or that of large expression, the step she had taken the afternoon of her husband's return from Matcham with his companion properly belonged. For it had been a step, distinctly, on Maggie's part, her deciding to do something, just then and there, which would strike Amerigo as unusual, and this even though her departure from custom had merely consisted in her so arranging that he wouldn't find her, as he would definitely expect to do, in Eaton Square. He would have, strangely enough, as might seem to him, to come back home for it, and there get the impression of her rather pointedly, or at least all impatiently and independently, awaiting him. These were small variations and mild manoeuvres, but they went accompanied on Maggie's part, as we have mentioned, with an infinite sense of intention. Her watching by his fireside for her husband's return from an absence might superficially have presented itself as the most natural act in the world, and the only one, into the bargain, on which he would positively have reckoned. It fell by this circumstance into the order of plain matters, and yet the very aspect by which it was, in the event, handed over to her brooding fancy was the fact that she had done with it all she had designed. She had put her

thought to the proof, and the proof had shown its edge; this was what was before her, that she was no longer playing with blunt and idle tools, with weapons that didn't cut. There passed across her vision ten times a day the gleam of a bare blade, and at this it was that she most shut her eyes, most knew the impulse to cheat herself with motion and sound. She had merely driven, on a certain Wednesday, to Portland Place, instead of remaining in Eaton Square, and she privately repeated it again and again — there had appeared beforehand no reason why she should have seen the mantle of history flung, by a single sharp sweep, over so commonplace a deed. That, all the same, was what had happened; it had been bitten into her mind, all in an hour, that nothing she had ever done would hereafter, in some way yet to be determined, so count for her — perhaps not even what she had done in accepting, in their old golden Rome, Amerigo's proposal of marriage. And yet, by her little crouching posture there, that of a timid tigress, she had meant nothing recklessly ultimate, nothing clumsily fundamental; so that she called it names, the invidious, the grotesque attitude, holding it up to her own ridicule, reducing so far as she could the portee of what had followed it. She had but wanted to get nearer — nearer to something indeed that she couldn't, that she wouldn't, even to herself, describe; and the degree of this achieved nearness was what had been in advance incalculable. Her actual multiplication of distractions and suppressions, whatever it did for her, failed to prevent her living over again any chosen minute — for she could choose them, she could fix them — of the freshness of relation produced by her having administered to her husband the first surprise to which she had ever treated him. It had been a poor thing, but it had been all her own, and the whole passage was backwardly there, a great picture hung on the wall of her daily life, for her to make what she would of.

It fell, for retrospect, into a succession of moments that were WATCHABLE still; almost in the manner of the different things done during a scene on the stage, some scene so acted as to have left a great impression on the tenant of one of the stalls. Several of these moments stood out beyond the others, and those she could feel again most, count again like the firm pearls on a string, had belonged more particularly to the lapse of time before dinner — dinner which had been so late, quite at nine o'clock, that evening, thanks to the final lateness of Amerigo's own advent. These were parts of the experience — though in fact there had been a good many of them — between which her impression could continue sharply to discriminate. Before the subsequent passages, much later on, it was to be said, the flame of memory turned to an equalising glow, that of a lamp in some side-chapel in which incense was thick. The great moment, at any rate, for conscious repossession, was doubtless the first: the strange little timed silence which she had fully gauged, on the spot, as altogether beyond her own intention, but which — for just how long? should she ever really know for just how long? — she could do nothing to break. She was in the smaller drawing-room, in which she always "sat," and she had, by calculation, dressed for dinner on finally coming in. It was a wonder how many things she had calculated in respect to this small incident — a matter for the importance of which she had so quite indefinite a measure. He would be late — he would be very late; that was the one certainty that seemed to look her in the face. There was still also the possibility that if he drove with Charlotte straight to Eaton Square he might think it best to remain there even on learning she had come away. She had left no message for him on any such chance; this was another of her small shades of decision, though the effect of it might be to keep him still longer absent. He might suppose she would already have dined; he might stay, with all he would have to tell, just on purpose to be nice to her father. She had known him to stretch the point, to these beautiful ends, far beyond that; he had more than once stretched it to the sacrifice of the opportunity of dressing.

If she herself had now avoided any such sacrifice, and had made herself, during the time at her disposal, quite inordinately fresh and quite positively smart, this had probably added, while she waited and waited, to that very tension of spirit in which she was afterwards to find the image of her having crouched. She did her best, quite intensely, by herself, to banish any such appearance; she couldn't help it if she couldn't read her pale novel — ah, that, par exemple, was beyond her! but she could at least sit by the lamp with the book, sit there with her newest frock, worn for the first time, sticking out, all round her, quite stiff and grand; even perhaps a little too stiff and too grand for a familiar and domestic frock, yet marked none the less, this time, she ventured to hope, by incontestable intrinsic merit. She had glanced repeatedly at the clock, but she had refused herself the weak indulgence of walking up and down, though the act of doing so, she knew, would make her feel, on the polished floor, with the rustle and the "hang," still more beautifully bedecked. The difficulty was that it would also make her feel herself still more sharply in a state; which was exactly what she proposed not to do. The only drops of her anxiety had been when her thought strayed complacently, with her eyes, to the front of her gown, which was in a manner a refuge, a beguilement, especially when she was able

to fix it long enough to wonder if it would at last really satisfy Charlotte. She had ever been, in respect to her clothes, rather timorous and uncertain; for the last year, above all, she had lived in the light of Charlotte's possible and rather inscrutable judgment of them. Charlotte's own were simply the most charming and interesting that any woman had ever put on; there was a kind of poetic justice in her being at last able, in this particular, thanks to means, thanks quite to omnipotence, freely to exercise her genius. But Maggie would have described herself as, in these connections, constantly and intimately "torn"; conscious on one side of the impossibility of copying her companion and conscious on the other of the impossibility of sounding her, independently, to the bottom. Yes, it was one of the things she should go down to her grave without having known — how Charlotte, after all had been said, really thought her stepdaughter looked under any supposedly ingenious personal experiment. She had always been lovely about the stepdaughter's material braveries — had done, for her, the very best with them; but there had ever fitfully danced at the back of Maggie's head the suspicion that these expressions were mercies, not judgments, embodying no absolute, but only a relative, frankness. Hadn't Charlotte, with so perfect a critical vision, if the truth were known, given her up as hopeless — hopeless by a serious standard, and thereby invented for her a different and inferior one, in which, as the only thing to be done, she patiently and soothingly abetted her? Hadn't she, in other words, assented in secret despair, perhaps even in secret irritation, to her being ridiculous? — so that the best now possible was to wonder, once in a great while, whether one mightn't give her the surprise of something a little less out of the true note than usual. Something of this kind was the question that Maggie, while the absentees still delayed, asked of the appearance she was endeavouring to present; but with the result, repeatedly again, that it only went and lost itself in the thick air that had begun more and more to hang, for our young woman, over her accumulations of the unanswered. They were THERE, these accumulations; they were like a roomful of confused objects, never as yet "sorted," which for some time now she had been passing and re-passing, along the corridor of her life. She passed it when she could without opening the door; then, on occasion, she turned the key to throw in a fresh contribution. So it was that she had been getting things out of the way. They rejoined the rest of the confusion; it was as if they found their place, by some instinct of affinity, in the heap. They knew, in short, where to go; and when she, at present, by a mental act, once more pushed the door open, she had practically a sense of method and experience. What she should never know about Charlotte's thought — she tossed THAT in. It would find itself in company, and she might at last have been standing there long enough to see it fall into its corner. The sight moreover would doubtless have made her stare, had her attention been more free — the sight of the mass of vain things, congruous, incongruous, that awaited every addition. It made her in fact, with a vague gasp, turn away, and what had further determined this was the final sharp extinction of the inward scene by the outward. The quite different door had opened and her husband was there.

It had been as strange as she could consent, afterwards, to think it; it had been, essentially, what had made the abrupt bend in her life: he had come back, had followed her from the other house, VISIBLY uncertain — this was written in the face he for the first minute showed her. It had been written only for those seconds, and it had appeared to go, quickly, after they began to talk; but while it lasted it had been written large, and, though she didn't quite know what she had expected of him, she felt she hadn't expected the least shade of embarrassment. What had made the embarrassment — she called it embarrassment so as to be able to assure herself she put it at the very worst — what had made the particular look was his thus distinguishably wishing to see how he should find her. Why FIRST — that had, later on, kept coming to her; the question dangled there as if it were the key to everything. With the sense of it on the spot, she had felt, overwhelmingly, that she was significant, that so she must instantly strike him, and that this had a kind of violence beyond what she had intended. It was in fact even at the moment not absent from her view that he might easily have made an abject fool of her — at least for the time. She had indeed, for just ten seconds, been afraid of some such turn: the uncertainty in his face had become so, the next thing, an uncertainty in the very air. Three words of impatience the least bit loud, some outbreak of "What in the world are you 'up to', and what do you mean?" any note of that sort would instantly have brought her low — and this all the more that heaven knew she hadn't in any manner designed to be high. It was such a trifle, her small breach with custom, or at any rate with his natural presumption, that all magnitude of wonder had already had, before one could deprecate the shadow of it, the effect of a complication. It had made for him some difference that she couldn't measure, this meeting him at home and alone instead of elsewhere and with others, and back and back it kept coming to her that the blankness he showed her before he was able to SEE might, should she choose to insist on it, have a

meaning — have, as who should say, an historic value — beyond the importance of momentary expressions in general. She had naturally had on the spot no ready notion of what he might want to see; it was enough for a ready notion, not to speak of a beating heart, that he DID see, that he saw his wife in her own drawing-room at the hour when she would most properly be there. He hadn't in any way challenged her, it was true, and, after those instants during which she now believed him to have been harbouring the impression of something unusually prepared and pointed in her attitude and array, he had advanced upon her smiling and smiling, and thus, without hesitation at the last, had taken her into his arms. The hesitation had been at the first, and she at present saw that he had surmounted it without her help. She had given him no help; for if, on the one hand, she couldn't speak for hesitation, so on the other — and especially as he didn't ask her — she couldn't explain why she was agitated. She had known it all the while down to her toes, known it in his presence with fresh intensity, and if he had uttered but a question it would have pressed in her the spring of recklessness. It had been strange that the most natural thing of all to say to him should have had that appearance; but she was more than ever conscious that any appearance she had would come round, more or less straight, to her father, whose life was now so quiet, on the basis accepted for it, that any alteration of his consciousness even in the possible sense of enlivenment, would make their precious equilibrium waver. THAT was at the bottom of her mind, that their equilibrium was everything, and that it was practically precarious, a matter of a hair's breadth for the loss of the balance. It was the equilibrium, or at all events her conscious fear about it, that had brought her heart into her mouth; and the same fear was, on either side, in the silent look she and Amerigo had exchanged. The happy balance that demanded this amount of consideration was truly thus, as by its own confession, a delicate matter; but that her husband had also HIS habit of anxiety and his general caution only brought them, after all, more closely together. It would have been most beautifully, therefore, in the name of the equilibrium, and in that of her joy at their feeling so exactly the same about it, that she might have spoken if she had permitted the truth on the subject of her behaviour to ring out — on the subject of that poor little behaviour which was for the moment so very limited a case of eccentricity.

"'Why, why' have I made this evening such a point of our not all dining together? Well, because I've all day been so wanting you alone that I finally couldn't bear it, and that there didn't seem any great reason why I should try to. THAT came to me — funny as it may at first sound, with all the things we've so wonderfully got into the way of bearing for each other. You've seemed these last days — I don't know what: more absent than ever before, too absent for us merely to go on so. It's all very well, and I perfectly see how beautiful it is, all round; but there comes a day when something snaps, when the full cup, filled to the very brim, begins to flow over. That's what has happened to my need of you — the cup, all day, has been too full to carry. So here I am with it, spilling it over you — and just for the reason that is the reason of my life. After all, I've scarcely to explain that I'm as much in love with you now as the first hour; except that there are some hours — which I know when they come, because they almost frighten me — that show me I'm even more so. They come of themselves — and, ah, they've been coming! After all, after all — !" Some such words as those were what DIDN'T ring out, yet it was as if even the unuttered sound had been quenched here in its own quaver. It was where utterance would have broken down by its very weight if he had let it get so far. Without that extremity, at the end of a moment, he had taken in what he needed to take — that his wife was TESTIFYING, that she adored and missed and desired him. "After all, after all," since she put it so, she was right. That was what he had to respond to; that was what, from the moment that, as has been said, he "saw," he had to treat as the most pertinent thing possible. He held her close and long, in expression of their personal reunion — this, obviously, was one way of doing so. He rubbed his cheek, tenderly, and with a deep vague murmur, against her face, that side of her face she was not pressing to his breast. That was, not less obviously, another way, and there were ways enough, in short, for his extemporised ease, for the good humour she was afterwards to find herself thinking of as his infinite tact. This last was partly, no doubt, because the question of tact might be felt as having come up at the end of a quarter of an hour during which he had liberally talked and she had genially questioned. He had told her of his day, the happy thought of his roundabout journey with Charlotte, all their cathedral-hunting adventure, and how it had turned out rather more of an affair than they expected. The moral of it was, at any rate, that he was tired, verily, and must have a bath and dress — to which end she would kindly excuse him for the shortest time possible. She was to remember afterwards something that had passed between them on this — how he had looked, for her, during an instant, at the door, before going out, how he had met her asking him, in hesitation first, then quickly in decision, whether she couldn't help him by going up with him. He had perhaps also for a moment hesitated, but he had declined her offer, and she was to

preserve, as I say, the memory of the smile with which he had opined that at that rate they wouldn't dine till ten o'clock and that he should go straighter and faster alone. Such things, as I say, were to come back to her — they played, through her full after-sense, like lights on the whole impression; the subsequent parts of the experience were not to have blurred their distinctness. One of these subsequent parts, the first, had been the not inconsiderable length, to her later and more analytic consciousness, of this second wait for her husband's reappearance. She might certainly, with the best will in the world, had she gone up with him, have been more in his way than not, since people could really, almost always, hurry better without help than with it. Still, she could actually hardly have made him take more time than he struck her taking, though it must indeed be added that there was now in this much-thinking little person's state of mind no mere crudity of impatience. Something had happened, rapidly, with the beautiful sight of him and with the drop of her fear of having annoyed him by making him go to and fro. Subsidence of the fearsome, for Maggie's spirit, was always, at first, positive emergence of the sweet, and it was long since anything had been so sweet to her as the particular quality suddenly given by her present emotion to the sense of possession.

XXVI

Amerigo was away from her again, as she sat there, as she walked there without him — for she had, with the difference of his presence in the house, ceased to keep herself from moving about; but the hour was filled nevertheless with the effect of his nearness, and above all with the effect, strange in an intimacy so established, of an almost renewed vision of the facts of his aspect. She had seen him last but five days since, yet he had stood there before her as if restored from some far country, some long voyage, some combination of dangers or fatigues. This unquenchable variety in his appeal to her interest, what did it mean but that — reduced to the flatness of mere statement — she was married, by good fortune, to an altogether dazzling person? That was an old, old story, but the truth of it shone out to her like the beauty of some family picture, some mellow portrait of an ancestor, that she might have been looking at, almost in surprise, after a long intermission. The dazzling person was upstairs and she was down, and there were moreover the other facts of the selection and decision that this demonstration of her own had required, and of the constant care that the equilibrium involved; but she had, all the same, never felt so absorbingly married, so abjectly conscious of a master of her fate. He could do what he would with her; in fact what was actually happening was that he was actually doing it. "What he would," what he REALLY would — only that quantity itself escaped perhaps, in the brightness of the high harmony, familiar naming and discussing. It was enough of a recognition for her that, whatever the thing he might desire, he would always absolutely bring it off. She knew at this moment, without a question, with the fullest surrender, how he had brought off, in her, by scarce more than a single allusion, a perfect flutter of tenderness. If he had come back tired, tired from his long day, the exertion had been, literally, in her service and her father's. They two had sat at home at peace, the Principino between them, the complications of life kept down, the bores sifted out, the large ease of the home preserved, because of the way the others held the field and braved the weather. Amerigo never complained — any more than, for that matter, Charlotte did; but she seemed to see to-night as she had never yet quite done that their business of social representation, conceived as they conceived it, beyond any conception of her own, and conscientiously carried out, was an affair of living always in harness. She remembered Fanny Assingham's old judgment, that friend's description of her father and herself as not living at all, as not knowing what to do or what might be done for them; and there came back to her with it an echo of the long talk they had had together, one September day at Fawns, under the trees, when she put before him this dictum of Fanny's.

That occasion might have counted for them — she had already often made the reflection — as the first step in an existence more intelligently arranged. It had been an hour from which the chain of causes and consequences was definitely traceable — so many things, and at the head of the list her father's marriage, having appeared to her to flow from Charlotte's visit to Fawns, and that event itself having flowed from the memorable talk. But what perhaps most came out in the light of these concatenations was that it had been, for all the world, as if Charlotte had been "had in," as the servants always said of extra help, because they had thus suffered it to be pointed out to them that if their family coach lumbered and stuck the fault was in its lacking its complement of wheels. Having but three, as they might say, it had wanted another, and what had Charlotte done from the first but begin to act, on the spot, and ever so smoothly and beautifully, as a fourth? Nothing had been, immediately, more manifest than the greater grace of the movement of the vehicle — as to which, for the completeness of her image, Maggie was now supremely to feel how every strain had been lightened for herself. So far as SHE was one of the wheels she had but to keep in her place; since the work was done for her she felt no weight, and it wasn't too much to acknowledge that she had scarce to turn round. She had a long pause before the fire during which she might have been fixing with intensity her projected vision, have been conscious even of its taking an absurd, fantastic shape. She might have been watching the family coach pass and noting that, somehow, Amerigo and Charlotte were pulling it while she and her father were not so much as pushing. They were seated inside together, dandling the Principino and holding him up to the windows, to see and be seen, like an infant positively royal; so that the exertion was ALL with the others. Maggie found in this image a repeated challenge; again and yet again she paused before the fire: after which, each time, in the manner of one for whom a strong light has suddenly broken, she gave herself to livelier movement. She had seen herself at last, in the picture she was studying, suddenly jump from the coach; whereupon, frankly, with the wonder of the sight, her eyes opened wider and her heart stood still for a moment. She looked at the person so acting as if this person were somebody else, waiting with intensity to

see what would follow. The person had taken a decision — which was evidently because an impulse long gathering had at last felt a sharpest pressure. Only how was the decision to be applied? — what, in particular, would the figure in the picture do? She looked about her, from the middle of the room, under the force of this question, as if THERE, exactly, were the field of action involved. Then, as the door opened again, she recognised, whatever the action, the form, at any rate, of a first opportunity. Her husband had reappeared — he stood before her refreshed, almost radiant, quite reassuring. Dressed, anointed, fragrant, ready, above all, for his dinner, he smiled at her over the end of their delay. It was as if her opportunity had depended on his look — and now she saw that it was good. There was still, for the instant, something in suspense, but it passed more quickly than on his previous entrance. He was already holding out his arms. It was, for hours and hours, later on, as if she had somehow been lifted aloft, were floated and carried on some warm high tide beneath which stumbling blocks had sunk out of sight. This came from her being again, for the time, in the enjoyment of confidence, from her knowing, as she believed, what to do. All the next day, and all the next, she appeared to herself to know it. She had a plan, and she rejoiced in her plan: this consisted of the light that, suddenly breaking into her restless reverie, had marked the climax of that vigil. It had come to her as a question— "What if I've abandoned THEM, you know? What if I've accepted too passively the funny form of our life?" There would be a process of her own by which she might do differently in respect to Amerigo and Charlotte — a process quite independent of any process of theirs. Such a solution had but to rise before her to affect her, to charm her, with its simplicity, an advantageous simplicity she had been stupid, for so long, not to have been struck by; and the simplicity meanwhile seemed proved by the success that had already begun to attend her. She had only had herself to do something to see how immediately it answered. This consciousness of its having answered with her husband was the uplifting, sustaining wave. He had "met" her — she so put it to herself; met her with an effect of generosity and of gaiety, in especial, on his coming back to her ready for dinner, which she wore in her breast as the token of an escape for them both from something not quite definite, but clearly, much less good. Even at that moment, in fact, her plan had begun to work; she had been, when he brightly reappeared, in the act of plucking it out of the heart of her earnestness — plucking it, in the garden of thought, as if it had been some full-blown flower that she could present to him on the spot. Well, it was the flower of participation, and as that, then and there, she held it out to him, putting straightway into execution the idea, so needlessly, so absurdly obscured, of her SHARING with him, whatever the enjoyment, the interest, the experience might be — and sharing also, for that matter, with Charlotte.

She had thrown herself, at dinner, into every feature of the recent adventure of the companions, letting him see, without reserve, that she wished to hear everything about it, and making Charlotte in particular, Charlotte's judgment of Matcham, Charlotte's aspect, her success there, her effect traceably produced, her clothes inimitably worn, her cleverness gracefully displayed, her social utility, in fine, brilliantly exemplified, the subject of endless inquiry. Maggie's inquiry was most empathetic, moreover, for the whole happy thought of the cathedral-hunt, which she was so glad they had entertained, and as to the pleasant results of which, down to the cold beef and bread-and-cheese, the queer old smell and the dirty table-cloth at the inn, Amerigo was good-humouredly responsive. He had looked at her across the table, more than once, as if touched by the humility of this welcome offered to impressions at second-hand, the amusements, the large freedoms only of others — as if recognising in it something fairly exquisite; and at the end, while they were alone, before she had rung for a servant, he had renewed again his condonation of the little irregularity, such as it was, on which she had ventured. They had risen together to come upstairs; he had been talking at the last about some of the people, at the very last of all about Lady Castledean and Mr. Blint; after which she had once more broken ground on the matter of the "type" of Gloucester. It brought her, as he came round the table to join her, yet another of his kind conscious stares, one of the looks, visibly beguiled, but at the same time not invisibly puzzled, with which he had already shown his sense of this charming grace of her curiosity. It was as if he might for a moment be going to say:— "You needn't PRETEND, dearest, quite so hard, needn't think it necessary to care quite so much!" — it was as if he stood there before her with some such easy intelligence, some such intimate reassurance, on his lips. Her answer would have been all ready — that she wasn't in the least pretending; and she looked up at him, while he took her hand, with the maintenance, the real persistence, of her lucid little plan in her eyes. She wanted him to understand from that very moment that she was going to be WITH him again, quite with them, together, as she doubtless hadn't been since the "funny" changes — that was really all one could call them — into which they had each, as for the sake of the others, too easily and too obligingly slipped. They had taken too much for granted that their life together required, as people in

London said, a special "form" — which was very well so long as the form was kept only for the outside world and was made no more of among themselves than the pretty mould of an iced pudding, or something of that sort, into which, to help yourself, you didn't hesitate to break with the spoon. So much as that she would, with an opening, have allowed herself furthermore to observe; she wanted him to understand how her scheme embraced Charlotte too; so that if he had but uttered the acknowledgment she judged him on the point of making — the acknowledgment of his catching at her brave little idea for their case — she would have found herself, as distinctly, voluble almost to eloquence.

What befell, however, was that even while she thus waited she felt herself present at a process taking place rather deeper within him than the occasion, on the whole, appeared to require — a process of weighing something in the balance, of considering, deciding, dismissing. He had guessed that she was there with an idea, there in fact by reason of her idea; only this, oddly enough, was what at the last stayed his words. She was helped to these perceptions by his now looking at her still harder than he had yet done — which really brought it to the turn of a hair, for her, that she didn't make sure his notion of her idea was the right one. It was the turn of a hair, because he had possession of her hands and was bending toward her, ever so kindly, as if to see, to understand, more, or possibly give more — she didn't know which; and that had the effect of simply putting her, as she would have said, in his power. She gave up, let her idea go, let everything go; her one consciousness was that he was taking her again into his arms. It was not till afterwards that she discriminated as to this; felt how the act operated with him instead of the words he hadn't uttered — operated, in his view, as probably better than any words, as always better, in fact, at any time, than anything. Her acceptance of it, her response to it, inevitable, foredoomed, came back to her, later on, as a virtual assent to the assumption he had thus made that there was really nothing such a demonstration didn't anticipate and didn't dispose of, and that the spring acting within herself moreover might well have been, beyond any other, the impulse legitimately to provoke it. It made, for any issue, the third time since his return that he had drawn her to his breast; and at present, holding her to his side as they left the room, he kept her close for their moving into the hall and across it, kept her for their slow return together to the apartments above. He had been right, overwhelmingly right, as to the felicity of his tenderness and the degree of her sensibility, but even while she felt these things sweep all others away she tasted of a sort of terror of the weakness they produced in her. It was still, for her, that she had positively something to do, and that she mustn't be weak for this, must much rather be strong. For many hours after, none the less, she remained weak — if weak it was; though holding fast indeed to the theory of her success, since her agitated overture had been, after all, so unmistakably met.

She recovered soon enough on the whole, the sense that this left her Charlotte always to deal with — Charlotte who, at any rate, however SHE might meet overtures, must meet them, at the worst, more or less differently. Of that inevitability, of such other ranges of response as were open to Charlotte, Maggie took the measure in approaching her, on the morrow of her return from Matcham, with the same show of desire to hear all her story. She wanted the whole picture from her, as she had wanted it from her companion, and, promptly, in Eaton Square, whither, without the Prince, she repaired, almost ostentatiously, for the purpose, this purpose only, she brought her repeatedly back to the subject, both in her husband's presence and during several scraps of independent colloquy. Before her father, instinctively, Maggie took the ground that his wish for interesting echoes would be not less than her own — allowing, that is, for everything his wife would already have had to tell him, for such passages, between them, as might have occurred since the evening before. Joining them after luncheon, reaching them, in her desire to proceed with the application of her idea, before they had quitted the breakfast-room, the scene of their mid-day meal, she referred, in her parent's presence, to what she might have lost by delay, and expressed the hope that there would be an anecdote or two left for her to pick up. Charlotte was dressed to go out, and her husband, it appeared, rather positively prepared not to; he had left the table, but was seated near the fire with two or three of the morning papers and the residuum of the second and third posts on a stand beside him — more even than the usual extravagance, as Maggie's glance made out, of circulars, catalogues, advertisements, announcements of sales, foreign envelopes and foreign handwritings that were as unmistakable as foreign clothes. Charlotte, at the window, looking into the side-street that abutted on the Square, might have been watching for their visitor's advent before withdrawing; and in the light, strange and coloured, like that of a painted picture, which fixed the impression for her, objects took on values not hitherto so fully shown. It was the effect of her quickened sensibility; she knew herself again in presence of a problem, in need of a solution for which she must

intensely work: that consciousness, lately born in her, had been taught the evening before to accept a temporary lapse, but had quickly enough again, with her getting out of her own house and her walking across half the town — for she had come from Portland Place on foot — found breath still in its lungs.

It exhaled this breath in a sigh, faint and unheard; her tribute, while she stood there before speaking, to realities looming through the golden mist that had already begun to be scattered. The conditions facing her had yielded, for the time, to the golden mist — had considerably melted away; but there they were again, definite, and it was for the next quarter of an hour as if she could have counted them one by one on her fingers. Sharp to her above all was the renewed attestation of her father's comprehensive acceptances, which she had so long regarded as of the same quality with her own, but which, so distinctly now, she should have the complication of being obliged to deal with separately. They had not yet struck her as absolutely extraordinary — which had made for her lumping them with her own, since her view of her own had but so lately begun to change; though it instantly stood out for her that there was really no new judgment of them she should be able to show without attracting in some degree his attention, without perhaps exciting his surprise and making thereby, for the situation she shared with him, some difference. She was reminded and warned by the concrete image; and for a minute Charlotte's face, immediately presented to her, affected her as searching her own to see the reminder tell. She had not less promptly kissed her stepmother, and then had bent over her father, from behind, and laid her cheek upon him; little amenities tantamount heretofore to an easy change of guard — Charlotte's own frequent, though always cheerful, term of comparison for this process of transfer. Maggie figured thus as the relieving sentry, and so smoothly did use and custom work for them that her mate might even, on this occasion, after acceptance of the pass-word, have departed without irrelevant and, in strictness, unsoldierly gossip. This was not, none the less, what happened; inasmuch as if our young woman had been floated over her first impulse to break the existing charm at a stroke, it yet took her but an instant to sound, at any risk, the note she had been privately practising. If she had practised it the day before, at dinner, on Amerigo, she knew but the better how to begin for it with Mrs. Verver, and it immensely helped her, for that matter, to be able at once to speak of the Prince as having done more to quicken than to soothe her curiosity. Frankly and gaily she had come to ask — to ask what, in their unusually prolonged campaign, the two had achieved. She had got out of her husband, she admitted, what she could, but husbands were never the persons who answered such questions ideally. He had only made her more curious, and she had arrived early, this way, in order to miss as little as possible of Charlotte's story.

"Wives, papa," she said; "are always much better reporters — though I grant," she added for Charlotte, "that fathers are not much better than husbands. He never," she smiled, "tells me more than a tenth of what you tell him; so I hope you haven't told him everything yet, since in that case I shall probably have lost the best part of it." Maggie went, she went — she felt herself going; she reminded herself of an actress who had been studying a part and rehearsing it, but who suddenly, on the stage, before the footlights, had begun to improvise, to speak lines not in the text. It was this very sense of the stage and the footlights that kept her up, made her rise higher: just as it was the sense of action that logically involved some platform — action quite positively for the first time in her life, or, counting in the previous afternoon, for the second. The platform remained for three or four days thus sensibly under her feet, and she had all the while, with it, the inspiration of quite remarkably, of quite heroically improvising. Preparation and practice had come but a short way; her part opened out, and she invented from moment to moment what to say and to do. She had but one rule of art — to keep within bounds and not lose her head; certainly she might see for a week how far that would take her. She said to herself, in her excitement, that it was perfectly simple: to bring about a difference, touch by touch, without letting either of the three, and least of all her father, so much as suspect her hand. If they should suspect they would want a reason, and the humiliating truth was that she wasn't ready with a reason — not, that is, with what she would have called a reasonable one. She thought of herself, instinctively, beautifully, as having dealt, all her life, at her father's side and by his example, only in reasonable reasons; and what she would really have been most ashamed of would be to produce for HIM, in this line, some inferior substitute. Unless she were in a position to plead, definitely, that she was jealous she should be in no position to plead, decently, that she was dissatisfied. This latter condition would be a necessary implication of the former; without the former behind it it would HAVE to fall to the ground. So had the case, wonderfully, been arranged for her; there was a card she could play, but there was only one, and to play it would be to end the game. She felt herself — as at the small square green table, between the tall old silver candlesticks and the neatly arranged counters — her father's playmate and partner; and what it constantly came back to, in her

mind, was that for her to ask a question, to raise a doubt, to reflect in any degree on the play of the others, would be to break the charm. The charm she had to call it, since it kept her companion so constantly engaged, so perpetually seated and so contentedly occupied. To say anything at all would be, in fine, to have to say WHY she was jealous; and she could, in her private hours, but stare long, with suffused eyes, at that impossibility.

By the end of a week, the week that had begun, especially, with her morning hour, in Eaton Square, between her father and his wife, her consciousness of being beautifully treated had become again verily greater than her consciousness of anything else; and I must add, moreover, that she at last found herself rather oddly wondering what else, as a consciousness, could have been quite so overwhelming. Charlotte's response to the experiment of being more with her OUGHT, as she very well knew, to have stamped the experiment with the feeling of success; so that if the success itself seemed a boon less substantial than the original image of it, it enjoyed thereby a certain analogy with our young woman's aftertaste of Amerigo's own determined demonstrations. Maggie was to have retained, for that matter, more than one aftertaste, and if I have spoken of the impressions fixed in her as soon as she had, so insidiously, taken the field, a definite note must be made of her perception, during those moments, of Charlotte's prompt uncertainty. She had shown, no doubt — she couldn't not have shown — that she had arrived with an idea; quite exactly as she had shown her husband, the night before, that she was awaiting him with a sentiment. This analogy in the two situations was to keep up for her the remembrance of a kinship of expression in the two faces in respect to which all she as yet professed to herself was that she had affected them, or at any rate the sensibility each of them so admirably covered, in the same way. To make the comparison at all was, for Maggie, to return to it often, to brood upon it, to extract from it the last dregs of its interest — to play with it, in short, nervously, vaguely, incessantly, as she might have played with a medallion containing on either side a cherished little portrait and suspended round her neck by a gold chain of a firm fineness that no effort would ever snap. The miniatures were back to back, but she saw them forever face to face, and when she looked from one to the other she found in Charlotte's eyes the gleam of the momentary "What does she really want?" that had come and gone for her in the Prince's. So again, she saw the other light, the light touched into a glow both in Portland Place and in Eaton Square, as soon as she had betrayed that she wanted no harm — wanted no greater harm of Charlotte, that is, than to take in that she meant to go out with her. She had been present at that process as personally as she might have been present at some other domestic incident — the hanging of a new picture, say, or the fitting of the Principino with his first little trousers.

She remained present, accordingly, all the week, so charmingly and systematically did Mrs. Verver now welcome her company. Charlotte had but wanted the hint, and what was it but the hint, after all, that, during the so subdued but so ineffaceable passage in the breakfast-room, she had seen her take? It had been taken moreover not with resignation, not with qualifications or reserves, however bland; it had been taken with avidity, with gratitude, with a grace of gentleness that supplanted explanations. The very liberality of this accommodation might indeed have appeared in the event to give its own account of the matter — as if it had fairly written the Princess down as a person of variations and had accordingly conformed but to a rule of tact in accepting these caprices for law. The caprice actually prevailing happened to be that the advent of one of the ladies anywhere should, till the fit had changed, become the sign, unfailingly, of the advent of the other; and it was emblazoned, in rich colour, on the bright face of this period, that Mrs. Verver only wished to know, on any occasion, what was expected of her, only held herself there for instructions, in order even to better them if possible. The two young women, while the passage lasted, became again very much the companions of other days, the days of Charlotte's prolonged visits to the admiring and bountiful Maggie, the days when equality of condition for them had been all the result of the latter's native vagueness about her own advantages. The earlier elements flushed into life again, the frequency, the intimacy, the high pitch of accompanying expression — appreciation, endearment, confidence; the rarer charm produced in each by this active contribution to the felicity of the other: all enhanced, furthermore — enhanced or qualified, who should say which? — by a new note of diplomacy, almost of anxiety, just sensible on Charlotte's part in particular; of intensity of observance, in the matter of appeal and response, in the matter of making sure the Princess might be disposed or gratified, that resembled an attempt to play again, with more refinement, at disparity of relation. Charlotte's attitude had, in short, its moments of flowering into pretty excesses of civility, self-effacements in the presence of others, sudden little formalisms of suggestion and recognition, that might have represented her sense of the duty of not "losing sight" of a social distinction. This impression came out most

for Maggie when, in their easier intervals, they had only themselves to regard, and when her companion's inveteracy of never passing first, of not sitting till she was seated, of not interrupting till she appeared to give leave, of not forgetting, too, familiarly, that in addition to being important she was also sensitive, had the effect of throwing over their intercourse a kind of silver tissue of decorum. It hung there above them like a canopy of state, a reminder that though the lady-in-waiting was an established favourite, safe in her position, a little queen, however, good-natured, was always a little queen and might, with small warning, remember it.

And yet another of these concomitants of feverish success, all the while, was the perception that in another quarter too things were being made easy. Charlotte's alacrity in meeting her had, in one sense, operated slightly overmuch as an intervention: it had begun to reabsorb her at the very hour of her husband's showing her that, to be all there, as the phrase was, he likewise only required — as one of the other phrases was too — the straight tip. She had heard him talk about the straight tip, in his moods of amusement at English slang, in his remarkable displays of assimilative power, power worthy of better causes and higher inspirations; and he had taken it from her, at need, in a way that, certainly in the first glow of relief, had made her brief interval seem large. Then, however, immediately, and even though superficially, there had declared itself a readjustment of relations to which she was, once more, practically a little sacrificed. "I must do everything," she had said, "without letting papa see what I do — at least till it's done!" but she scarce knew how she proposed, even for the next few days, to blind or beguile this participant in her life. What had in fact promptly enough happened, she presently recognised, was that if her stepmother had beautifully taken possession of her, and if she had virtually been rather snatched again thereby from her husband's side, so, on the other hand, this had, with as little delay, entailed some very charming assistance for her in Eaton Square. When she went home with Charlotte, from whatever happy demonstration, for the benefit of the world in which they supposed themselves to live, that there was no smallest reason why their closer association shouldn't be public and acclaimed — at these times she regularly found that Amerigo had come either to sit with his father-in-law in the absence of the ladies, or to make, on his side, precisely some such display of the easy working of the family life as would represent the equivalent of her excursions with Charlotte. Under this particular impression it was that everything in Maggie most melted and went to pieces — every thing, that is, that belonged to her disposition to challenge the perfection of their common state. It divided them again, that was true, this particular turn of the tide — cut them up afresh into pairs and parties; quite as if a sense for the equilibrium was what, between them all, had most power of insistence; quite as if Amerigo himself were all the while, at bottom, equally thinking of it and watching it. But, as against that, he was making her father not miss her, and he could have rendered neither of them a more excellent service. He was acting in short on a cue, the cue given him by observation; it had been enough for him to see the shade of change in her behaviour; his instinct for relations, the most exquisite conceivable, prompted him immediately to meet and match the difference, to play somehow into its hands. That was what it was, she renewedly felt, to have married a man who was, sublimely, a gentleman; so that, in spite of her not wanting to translate ALL their delicacies into the grossness of discussion, she yet found again and again, in Portland Place, moments for saying: "If I didn't love you, you know, for yourself, I should still love you for HIM." He looked at her, after such speeches, as Charlotte looked, in Eaton Square, when she called HER attention to his benevolence: through the dimness of the almost musing smile that took account of her extravagance, harmless though it might be, as a tendency to reckon with. "But my poor child," Charlotte might under this pressure have been on the point of replying, "that's the way nice people ARE, all round — so that why should one be surprised about it? We're all nice together — as why shouldn't we be? If we hadn't been we wouldn't have gone far — and I consider that we've gone very far indeed. Why should you 'take on' as if you weren't a perfect dear yourself, capable of all the sweetest things? — as if you hadn't in fact grown up in an atmosphere, the atmosphere of all the good things that I recognised, even of old, as soon as I came near you, and that you've allowed me now, between you, to make so blessedly my own." Mrs. Verver might in fact have but just failed to make another point, a point charmingly natural to her as a grateful and irreproachable wife. "It isn't a bit wonderful, I may also remind you, that your husband should find, when opportunity permits, worse things to do than to go about with mine. I happen, love, to appreciate my husband — I happen perfectly to understand that his acquaintance should be cultivated and his company enjoyed."

Some such happily-provoked remarks as these, from Charlotte, at the other house, had been in the air, but we have seen how there was also in the air, for our young woman, as an emanation from the same source, a distilled difference of which the very principle was to keep down objections and retorts. That impression

came back — it had its hours of doing so; and it may interest us on the ground of its having prompted in Maggie a final reflection, a reflection out of the heart of which a light flashed for her like a great flower grown in a night. As soon as this light had spread a little it produced in some quarters a surprising distinctness, made her of a sudden ask herself why there should have been even for three days the least obscurity. The perfection of her success, decidedly, was like some strange shore to which she had been noiselessly ferried and where, with a start, she found herself quaking at the thought that the boat might have put off again and left her. The word for it, the word that flashed the light, was that they were TREATING her, that they were proceeding with her — and, for that matter, with her father — by a plan that was the exact counterpart of her own. It was not from her that they took their cue, but — and this was what in particular made her sit up — from each other; and with a depth of unanimity, an exact coincidence of inspiration that, when once her attention had begun to fix it, struck her as staring out at her in recovered identities of behaviour, expression and tone. They had a view of her situation, and of the possible forms her own consciousness of it might take — a view determined by the change of attitude they had had, ever so subtly, to recognise in her on their return from Matcham. They had had to read into this small and all-but-suppressed variation a mute comment — on they didn't quite know what; and it now arched over the Princess's head like a vault of bold span that important communication between them on the subject couldn't have failed of being immediate. This new perception bristled for her, as we have said, with odd intimations, but questions unanswered played in and out of it as well — the question, for instance, of why such promptitude of harmony SHOULD have been important. Ah, when she began to recover, piece by piece, the process became lively; she might have been picking small shining diamonds out of the sweepings of her ordered house. She bent, in this pursuit, over her dust-bin; she challenged to the last grain the refuse of her innocent economy. Then it was that the dismissed vision of Amerigo, that evening, in arrest at the door of her salottino while her eyes, from her placed chair, took him in — then it was that this immense little memory gave out its full power. Since the question was of doors, she had afterwards, she now saw, shut it out; she had responsibly shut in, as we have understood, shut in there with her sentient self, only the fact of his reappearance and the plenitude of his presence. These things had been testimony, after all, to supersede any other, for on the spot, even while she looked, the warmly-washing wave had travelled far up the strand. She had subsequently lived, for hours she couldn't count, under the dizzying, smothering welter positively in submarine depths where everything came to her through walls of emerald and mother-of-pearl; though indeed she had got her head above them, for breath, when face to face with Charlotte again, on the morrow, in Eaton Square. Meanwhile, none the less, as was so apparent, the prior, the prime impression had remained, in the manner of a spying servant, on the other side of the barred threshold; a witness availing himself, in time, of the lightest pretext to re-enter. It was as if he had found this pretext in her observed necessity of comparing — comparing the obvious common elements in her husband's and her stepmother's ways of now "taking" her. With or without her witness, at any rate, she was led by comparison to a sense of the quantity of earnest intention operating, and operating so harmoniously, between her companions; and it was in the mitigated midnight of these approximations that she had made out the promise of her dawn.

It was a worked-out scheme for their not wounding her, for their behaving to her quite nobly; to which each had, in some winning way, induced the other to contribute, and which therefore, so far as that went, proved that she had become with them a subject of intimate study. Quickly, quickly, on a certain alarm taken, eagerly and anxiously, before they SHOULD, without knowing it, wound her, they had signalled from house to house their clever idea, the idea by which, for all these days, her own idea had been profiting. They had built her in with their purpose — which was why, above her, a vault seemed more heavily to arch; so that she sat there, in the solid chamber of her helplessness, as in a bath of benevolence artfully prepared for her, over the brim of which she could but just manage to see by stretching her neck. Baths of benevolence were very well, but, at least, unless one were a patient of some sort, a nervous eccentric or a lost child, one was usually not so immersed save by one's request. It wasn't in the least what she had requested. She had flapped her little wings as a symbol of desired flight, not merely as a plea for a more gilded cage and an extra allowance of lumps of sugar. Above all she hadn't complained, not by the quaver of a syllable — so what wound in particular had she shown her fear of receiving? What wound HAD she received — as to which she had exchanged the least word with them? If she had ever whined or moped they might have had some reason; but she would be hanged — she conversed with herself in strong language — if she had been, from beginning to end, anything but pliable and mild. It all came back, in consequence, to some required process of their own, a

process operating, quite positively, as a precaution and a policy. They had got her into the bath and, for consistency with themselves — which was with each other — must keep her there. In that condition she wouldn't interfere with the policy, which was established, which was arranged. Her thought, over this, arrived at a great intensity — had indeed its pauses and timidities, but always to take afterwards a further and lighter spring. The ground was well-nigh covered by the time she had made out her husband and his colleague as directly interested in preventing her freedom of movement. Policy or no policy, it was they themselves who were arranged. She must be kept in position so as not to DISarrange them. It fitted immensely together, the whole thing, as soon as she could give them a motive; for, strangely as it had by this time begun to appear to herself, she had hitherto not imagined them sustained by an ideal distinguishably different from her own. Of course they were arranged — all four arranged; but what had the basis of their life been, precisely, but that they were arranged together? Amerigo and Charlotte were arranged together, but she — to confine the matter only to herself — was arranged apart. It rushed over her, the full sense of all this, with quite another rush from that of the breaking wave of ten days before; and as her father himself seemed not to meet the vaguely-clutching hand with which, during the first shock of complete perception, she tried to steady herself, she felt very much alone.

XXVII

There had been, from far back — that is from the Christmas time on — a plan that the parent and the child should "do something lovely" together, and they had recurred to it on occasion, nursed it and brought it up theoretically, though without as yet quite allowing it to put its feet to the ground. The most it had done was to try a few steps on the drawing-room carpet, with much attendance, on either side, much holding up and guarding, much anticipation, in fine, of awkwardness or accident. Their companions, by the same token, had constantly assisted at the performance, following the experiment with sympathy and gaiety, and never so full of applause, Maggie now made out for herself, as when the infant project had kicked its little legs most wildly — kicked them, for all the world, across the Channel and half the Continent, kicked them over the Pyrenees and innocently crowed out some rich Spanish name. She asked herself at present if it had been a "real" belief that they were but wanting, for some such adventure, to snatch their moment; whether either had at any instant seen it as workable, save in the form of a toy to dangle before the other, that they should take flight, without wife or husband, for one more look, "before they died," at the Madrid pictures as well as for a drop of further weak delay in respect to three or four possible prizes, privately offered, rarities of the first water, responsibly reported on and profusely photographed, still patiently awaiting their noiseless arrival in retreats to which the clue had not otherwise been given away. The vision dallied with during the duskier days in Eaton Square had stretched to the span of three or four weeks of springtime for the total adventure, three or four weeks in the very spirit, after all, of their regular life, as their regular life had been persisting; full of shared mornings, afternoons, evenings, walks, drives, "looks-in," at old places, on vague chances; full also, in especial, of that purchased social ease, the sense of the comfort and credit of their house, which had essentially the perfection of something paid for, but which "came," on the whole, so cheap that it might have been felt as costing — as costing the parent and child — nothing. It was for Maggie to wonder, at present, if she had been sincere about their going, to ask herself whether she would have stuck to their plan even if nothing had happened.

Her view of the impossibility of sticking to it now may give us the measure of her sense that everything had happened. A difference had been made in her relation to each of her companions, and what it compelled her to say to herself was that to behave as she might have behaved before would be to act, for Amerigo and Charlotte, with the highest hypocrisy. She saw in these days that a journey abroad with her father would, more than anything else, have amounted, on his part and her own, to a last expression of an ecstasy of confidence, and that the charm of the idea, in fact, had been in some such sublimity. Day after day she put off the moment of "speaking," as she inwardly and very comprehensively, called it — speaking, that is, to her father; and all the more that she was ridden by a strange suspense as to his himself breaking silence. She gave him time, gave him, during several days, that morning, that noon, that night, and the next and the next and the next; even made up her mind that if he stood off longer it would be proof conclusive that he too wasn't at peace. They would then have been, all successfully, throwing dust in each other's eyes; and it would be at last as if they must turn away their faces, since the silver mist that protected them had begun to grow sensibly thin. Finally, at the end of April, she decided that if he should say nothing for another period of twenty-four hours she must take it as showing that they were, in her private phraseology, lost; so little possible sincerity could there be in pretending to care for a journey to Spain at the approach of a summer that already promised to be hot. Such a proposal, on his lips, such an extravagance of optimism, would be HIS way of being consistent — for that he didn't really want to move, or to move further, at the worst, than back to Fawns again, could only signify that he wasn't, at heart, contented. What he wanted, at any rate, and what he didn't want were, in the event, put to the proof for Maggie just in time to give her a fresh wind. She had been dining, with her husband, in Eaton Square, on the occasion of hospitality offered by Mr. and Mrs. Verver to Lord and Lady Castledean. The propriety of some demonstration of this sort had been for many days before our group, the question reduced to the mere issue of which of the two houses should first take the field. The issue had been easily settled — in the manner of every issue referred in any degree to Amerigo and Charlotte: the initiative obviously belonged to Mrs. Verver, who had gone to Matcham while Maggie had stayed away, and the evening in Eaton Square might have passed for a demonstration all the more personal that the dinner had been planned on "intimate" lines. Six other guests only, in addition to the host and the hostess of Matcham, made up the company, and each of these persons had for Maggie the interest of an attested connection with

the Easter revels at that visionary house. Their common memory of an occasion that had clearly left behind it an ineffaceable charm — this air of beatific reference, less subdued in the others than in Amerigo and Charlotte, lent them, together, an inscrutable comradeship against which the young woman's imagination broke in a small vain wave.

It wasn't that she wished she had been of the remembered party and possessed herself of its secrets; for she didn't care about its secrets — she could concern herself at present, absolutely, with no secret but her own. What occurred was simply that she became aware, at a stroke, of the quantity of further nourishment required by her own, and of the amount of it she might somehow extract from these people; whereby she rose, of a sudden, to the desire to possess and use them, even to the extent of braving, of fairly defying, of directly exploiting, of possibly quite enjoying, under cover of an evil duplicity, the felt element of curiosity with which they regarded her. Once she was conscious of the flitting wing of this last impression — the perception, irresistible, that she was something for their queer experience, just as they were something for hers — there was no limit to her conceived design of not letting them escape. She went and went, again, to-night, after her start was taken; went, positively, as she had felt herself going, three weeks before, on the morning when the vision of her father and his wife awaiting her together in the breakfast-room had been so determinant. In this other scene it was Lady Castledean who was determinant, who kindled the light, or at all events the heat, and who acted on the nerves; Lady Castledean whom she knew she, so oddly, didn't like, in spite of reasons upon reasons, the biggest diamonds on the yellowest hair, the longest lashes on the prettiest, falsest eyes, the oldest lace on the most violet velvet, the rightest manner on the wrongest assumption. Her ladyship's assumption was that she kept, at every moment of her life, every advantage — it made her beautifully soft, very nearly generous; so she didn't distinguish the little protuberant eyes of smaller social insects, often endowed with such a range, from the other decorative spots on their bodies and wings. Maggie had liked, in London, and in the world at large, so many more people than she had thought it right to fear, right even to so much as judge, that it positively quickened her fever to have to recognise, in this case, such a lapse of all the sequences. It was only that a charming clever woman wondered about her — that is wondered about her as Amerigo's wife, and wondered, moreover, with the intention of kindness and the spontaneity, almost, of surprise.

The point of view — that one — was what she read in their free contemplation, in that of the whole eight; there was something in Amerigo to be explained, and she was passed about, all tenderly and expertly, like a dressed doll held, in the right manner, by its firmly-stuffed middle, for the account she could give. She might have been made to give it by pressure of her stomach; she might have been expected to articulate, with a rare imitation of nature, "Oh yes, I'm HERE all the while; I'm also in my way a solid little fact and I cost originally a great deal of money: cost, that is, my father, for my outfit, and let in my husband for an amount of pains — toward my training — that money would scarce represent." Well, she WOULD meet them in some such way, and she translated her idea into action, after dinner, before they dispersed, by engaging them all, unconventionally, almost violently, to dine with her in Portland Place, just as they were, if they didn't mind the same party, which was the party she wanted. Oh she was going, she was going — she could feel it afresh; it was a good deal as if she had sneezed ten times or had suddenly burst into a comic song. There were breaks in the connection, as there would be hitches in the process; she didn't wholly see, yet, what they would do for her, nor quite how, herself, she should handle them; but she was dancing up and down, beneath her propriety, with the thought that she had at least begun something — she so fairly liked to feel that she was a point for convergence of wonder. It wasn't after all, either, that THEIR wonder so much signified — that of the cornered six, whom it glimmered before her that she might still live to drive about like a flock of sheep: the intensity of her consciousness, its sharpest savour, was in the theory of her having diverted, having, as they said, captured the attention of Amerigo and Charlotte, at neither of whom, all the while, did she so much as once look. She had pitched them in with the six, for that matter, so far as they themselves were concerned; they had dropped, for the succession of minutes, out of contact with their function — had, in short, startled and impressed, abandoned their post. "They're paralysed, they're paralysed!" she commented, deep within; so much it helped her own apprehension to hang together that they should suddenly lose their bearings.

Her grasp of appearances was thus out of proportion to her view of causes; but it came to her then and there that if she could only get the facts of appearance straight, only jam them down into their place, the reasons lurking behind them, kept uncertain, for the eyes, by their wavering and shifting, wouldn't perhaps be able to help showing. It wasn't of course that the Prince and Mrs. Verver marvelled to see her civil to their friends; it was rather, precisely, that civil was just what she wasn't: she had so departed from any such custom

of delicate approach — approach by the permitted note, the suggested "if," the accepted vagueness — as would enable the people in question to put her off if they wished. And the profit of her plan, the effect of the violence she was willing to let it go for, was exactly in their BEING the people in question, people she had seemed to be rather shy of before and for whom she suddenly opened her mouth so wide. Later on, we may add, with the ground soon covered by her agitated but resolute step, it was to cease to matter what people they were or weren't; but meanwhile the particular sense of them that she had taken home to-night had done her the service of seeming to break the ice where that formation was thickest. Still more unexpectedly, the service might have been the same for her father; inasmuch as, immediately, when everyone had gone, he did exactly what she had been waiting for and despairing of — and did it, as he did everything, with a simplicity that left any purpose of sounding him deeper, of drawing him out further, of going, in his own frequent phrase, "behind" what he said, nothing whatever to do. He brought it out straight, made it bravely and beautifully irrelevant, save for the plea of what they should lose by breaking the charm: "I guess we won't go down there after all, will we, Mag? — just when it's getting so pleasant here." That was all, with nothing to lead up to it; but it was done for her at a stroke, and done, not less, more rather, for Amerigo and Charlotte, on whom the immediate effect, as she secretly, as she almost breathlessly measured it, was prodigious. Everything now so fitted for her to everything else that she could feel the effect as prodigious even while sticking to her policy of giving the pair no look. There were thus some five wonderful minutes during which they loomed, to her sightless eyes, on either side of her, larger than they had ever loomed before, larger than life, larger than thought, larger than any danger or any safety. There was thus a space of time, in fine, fairly vertiginous for her, during which she took no more account of them than if they were not in the room.

She had never, never treated them in any such way — not even just now, when she had plied her art upon the Matcham band; her present manner was an intenser exclusion, and the air was charged with their silence while she talked with her other companion as if she had nothing but him to consider. He had given her the note amazingly, by his allusion to the pleasantness — that of such an occasion as his successful dinner — which might figure as their bribe for renouncing; so that it was all as if they were speaking selfishly, counting on a repetition of just such extensions of experience. Maggie achieved accordingly an act of unprecedented energy, threw herself into her father's presence as by the absolute consistency with which she held his eyes; saying to herself, at the same time that she smiled and talked and inaugurated her system, "What does he mean by it? That's the question — what does he mean?" but studying again all the signs in him that recent anxiety had made familiar and counting the stricken minutes on the part of the others. It was in their silence that the others loomed, as she felt; she had had no measure, she afterwards knew, of this duration, but it drew out and out — really to what would have been called in simpler conditions awkwardness — as if she herself were stretching the cord. Ten minutes later, however, in the homeward carriage, to which her husband, cutting delay short, had proceeded at the first announcement, ten minutes later she was to stretch it almost to breaking. The Prince had permitted her to linger much less, before his move to the door, than they usually lingered at the gossiping close of such evenings; which she, all responsive, took for a sign of his impatience to modify for her the odd effect of his not having, and of Charlotte's not having, instantly acclaimed the issue of the question debated, or more exactly, settled, before them. He had had time to become aware of this possible impression in her, and his virtually urging her into the carriage was connected with his feeling that he must take action on the new ground. A certain ambiguity in her would absolutely have tormented him; but he had already found something to soothe and correct — as to which she had, on her side, a shrewd notion of what it would be. She was herself, for that matter, prepared, and she was, of a truth, as she took her seat in the brougham, amazed at her preparation. It allowed her scarce an interval; she brought it straight out.

"I was certain that was what father would say if I should leave him alone. I HAVE been leaving him alone, and you see the effect. He hates now to move — he likes too much to be with us. But if you see the effect" — she felt herself magnificently keeping it up— "perhaps you don't see the cause. The cause, my dear, is too lovely."

Her husband, on taking his place beside her, had, during a minute or two, for her watching sense, neither said nor done anything; he had been, for that sense, as if thinking, waiting, deciding: yet it was still before he spoke that he, as she felt it to be, definitely acted. He put his arm round her and drew her close — indulged in the demonstration, the long, firm embrace by his single arm, the infinite pressure of her whole person to his own, that such opportunities had so often suggested and prescribed. Held, accordingly, and, as she could but too intimately feel, exquisitely solicited, she had said the thing she was intending and desiring to say, and as

to which she felt, even more than she felt anything else, that whatever he might do she mustn't be irresponsible. Yes, she was in his exerted grasp, and she knew what that was; but she was at the same time in the grasp of her conceived responsibility, and the extraordinary thing was that, of the two intensities, the second was presently to become the sharper. He took his time for it meanwhile, but he met her speech after a fashion.

"The cause of your father's deciding not to go?"

"Yes, and of my having wanted to let it act for him quietly — I mean without my insistence." She had, in her compressed state, another pause, and it made her feel as if she were immensely resisting. Strange enough was this sense for her, and altogether new, the sense of possessing, by miraculous help, some advantage that, absolutely then and there, in the carriage, as they rolled, she might either give up or keep. Strange, inexpressibly strange — so distinctly she saw that if she did give it up she should somehow give up everything for ever. And what her husband's grasp really meant, as her very bones registered, was that she SHOULD give it up: it was exactly for this that he had resorted to unfailing magic. He KNEW HOW to resort to it — he could be, on occasion, as she had lately more than ever learned, so munificent a lover: all of which was, precisely, a part of the character she had never ceased to regard in him as princely, a part of his large and beautiful ease, his genius for charm, for intercourse, for expression, for life. She should have but to lay her head back on his shoulder with a certain movement to make it definite for him that she didn't resist. To this, as they went, every throb of her consciousness prompted her — every throb, that is, but one, the throb of her deeper need to know where she "really" was. By the time she had uttered the rest of her idea, therefore, she was still keeping her head and intending to keep it; though she was also staring out of the carriage-window with eyes into which the tears of suffered pain had risen, indistinguishable, perhaps, happily, in the dusk. She was making an effort that horribly hurt her, and, as she couldn't cry out, her eyes swam in her silence. With them, all the same, through the square opening beside her, through the grey panorama of the London night, she achieved the feat of not losing sight of what she wanted; and her lips helped and protected her by being able to be gay. "It's not to leave YOU, my dear — for that he'll give up anything; just as he would go off anywhere, I think, you know, if you would go with him. I mean you and he alone," Maggie pursued with her gaze out of her window.

For which Amerigo's answer again took him a moment. "Ah, the dear old boy! You would like me to propose him something — ?"

"Well, if you think you could bear it."

"And leave," the Prince asked, "you and Charlotte alone?"

"Why not?" Maggie had also to wait a minute, but when she spoke it came clear. "Why shouldn't Charlotte be just one of MY reasons — my not liking to leave her? She has always been so good, so perfect, to me — but never so wonderfully as just now. We have somehow been more together — thinking, for the time, almost only of each other; it has been quite as in old days." And she proceeded consummately, for she felt it as consummate: "It's as if we had been missing each other, had got a little apart — though going on so side by side. But the good moments, if one only waits for them," she hastened to add, "come round of themselves. Moreover you've seen for yourself, since you've made it up so to father; feeling, for yourself, in your beautiful way, every difference, every air that blows; not having to be told or pushed, only being perfect to live with, through your habit of kindness and your exquisite instincts. But of course you've seen, all the while, that both he and I have deeply felt how you've managed; managed that he hasn't been too much alone and that I, on my side, haven't appeared, to — what you might call — neglect him. This is always," she continued, "what I can never bless you enough for; of all the good things you've done for me you've never done anything better." She went on explaining as for the pleasure of explaining — even though knowing he must recognise, as a part of his easy way too, her description of his large liberality. "Your taking the child down yourself, those days, and your coming, each time, to bring him away — nothing in the world, nothing you could have invented, would have kept father more under the charm. Besides, you know how you've always suited him, and how you've always so beautifully let it seem to him that he suits you. Only it has been, these last weeks, as if you wished — just in order to please him — to remind him of it afresh. So there it is," she wound up; "it's your doing. You've produced your effect — that of his wanting not to be, even for a month or two, where you're not. He doesn't want to bother or bore you — THAT, I think, you know, he never has done; and if you'll only give me time I'll come round again to making it my care, as always, that he shan't. But he can't bear you out of his sight."

She had kept it up and up, filling it out, crowding it in; and all, really, without difficulty, for it was, every word of it, thanks to a long evolution of feeling, what she had been primed to the brim with. She made the picture, forced it upon him, hung it before him; remembering, happily, how he had gone so far, one day, supported by the Principino, as to propose the Zoo in Eaton Square, to carry with him there, on the spot, under this pleasant inspiration, both his elder and his younger companion, with the latter of whom he had taken the tone that they were introducing Granddaddy, Granddaddy nervous and rather funking it, to lions and tigers more or less at large. Touch by touch she thus dropped into her husband's silence the truth about his good nature and his good manners; and it was this demonstration of his virtue, precisely, that added to the strangeness, even for herself, of her failing as yet to yield to him. It would be a question but of the most trivial act of surrender, the vibration of a nerve, the mere movement of a muscle; but the act grew important between them just through her doing perceptibly nothing, nothing but talk in the very tone that would naturally have swept her into tenderness. She knew more and more — every lapsing minute taught her — how he might by a single rightness make her cease to watch him; that rightness, a million miles removed from the queer actual, falling so short, which would consist of his breaking out to her divinely, indulgently, with the last happy inconsequence. "Come away with me, somewhere, YOU — and then we needn't think, we needn't even talk, of anything, of anyone else:" five words like that would answer her, would break her utterly down. But they were the only ones that would so serve. She waited for them, and there was a supreme instant when, by the testimony of all the rest of him, she seemed to feel them in his heart and on his lips; only they didn't sound, and as that made her wait again so it made her more intensely watch. This in turn showed her that he too watched and waited, and how much he had expected something that he now felt wouldn't come. Yes, it wouldn't come if he didn't answer her, if he but said the wrong things instead of the right. If he could say the right everything would come — it hung by a hair that everything might crystallise for their recovered happiness at his touch. This possibility glowed at her, however, for fifty seconds, only then to turn cold, and as it fell away from her she felt the chill of reality and knew again, all but pressed to his heart and with his breath upon her cheek, the slim rigour of her attitude, a rigour beyond that of her natural being. They had silences, at last, that were almost crudities of mutual resistance — silences that persisted through his felt effort to treat her recurrence to the part he had lately played, to interpret all the sweetness of her so talking to him, as a manner of making love to him. Ah, it was no such manner, heaven knew, for Maggie; she could make love, if this had been in question, better than that! On top of which it came to her presently to say, keeping in with what she had already spoken: "Except of course that, for the question of going off somewhere, he'd go readily, quite delightedly, with you. I verily believe he'd like to have you for a while to himself."

"Do you mean he thinks of proposing it?" the Prince after a moment sounded.

"Oh no — he doesn't ask, as you must so often have seen. But I believe he'd go 'like a shot,' as you say, if you were to suggest it."

It had the air, she knew, of a kind of condition made, and she had asked herself while she spoke if it wouldn't cause his arm to let her go. The fact that it didn't suggested to her that she had made him, of a sudden, still more intensely think, think with such concentration that he could do but one thing at once. And it was precisely as if the concentration had the next moment been proved in him. He took a turn inconsistent with the superficial impression — a jump that made light of their approach to gravity and represented for her the need in him to gain time. That she made out, was his drawback — that the warning from her had come to him, and had come to Charlotte, after all, too suddenly. That they were in face of it rearranging, that they had to rearrange, was all before her again; yet to do as they would like they must enjoy a snatch, longer or shorter, of recovered independence. Amerigo, for the instant, was but doing as he didn't like, and it was as if she were watching his effort without disguise. "What's your father's idea, this year, then, about Fawns? Will he go at Whitsuntide, and will he then stay on?"

Maggie went through the form of thought. "He will really do, I imagine, as he has, in so many ways, so often done before; do whatever may seem most agreeable to yourself. And there's of course always Charlotte to be considered. Only their going early to Fawns, if they do go," she said, "needn't in the least entail your and my going."

"Ah," Amerigo echoed, "it needn't in the least entail your and my going?"

"We can do as we like. What they may do needn't trouble us, since they're by good fortune perfectly happy together."

"Oh," the Prince returned, "your father's never so happy as with you near him to enjoy his being so."

"Well, I may enjoy it," said Maggie, "but I'm not the cause of it."

"You're the cause," her husband declared, "of the greater part of everything that's good among us." But she received this tribute in silence, and the next moment he pursued: "If Mrs. Verver has arrears of time with you to make up, as you say, she'll scarcely do it — or you scarcely will — by our cutting, your and my cutting, too loose."

"I see what you mean," Maggie mused.

He let her for a little to give her attention to it; after which, "Shall I just quite, of a sudden," he asked, "propose him a journey?"

Maggie hesitated, but she brought forth the fruit of reflection. "It would have the merit that Charlotte then would be with me — with me, I mean, so much more. Also that I shouldn't, by choosing such a time for going away, seem unconscious and ungrateful, seem not to respond, seem in fact rather to wish to shake her off. I should respond, on the contrary, very markedly — by being here alone with her for a month."

"And would you like to be here alone with her for a month?"

"I could do with it beautifully. Or we might even," she said quite gaily, "go together down to Fawns."

"You could be so very content without me?" the Prince presently inquired.

"Yes, my own dear — if you could be content for a while with father. That would keep me up. I might, for the time," she went on, "go to stay there with Charlotte; or, better still, she might come to Portland Place."

"Oho!" said the Prince with cheerful vagueness.

"I should feel, you see," she continued, "that the two of us were showing the same sort of kindness."

Amerigo thought. "The two of us? Charlotte and I?"

Maggie again hesitated. "You and I, darling."

"I see, I see" — he promptly took it in. "And what reason shall I give — give, I mean, your father?"

"For asking him to go off? Why, the very simplest — if you conscientiously can. The desire," said Maggie, "to be agreeable to him. Just that only."

Something in this reply made her husband again reflect. "'Conscientiously?' Why shouldn't I conscientiously? It wouldn't, by your own contention," he developed, "represent any surprise for him. I must strike him sufficiently as, at the worst, the last person in the world to wish to do anything to hurt him."

Ah, there it was again, for Maggie — the note already sounded, the note of the felt need of not working harm! Why this precautionary view, she asked herself afresh, when her father had complained, at the very least, as little as herself? With their stillness together so perfect, what had suggested so, around them, the attitude of sparing them? Her inner vision fixed it once more, this attitude, saw it, in the others, as vivid and concrete, extended it straight from her companion to Charlotte. Before she was well aware, accordingly, she had echoed in this intensity of thought Amerigo's last words. "You're the last person in the world to wish to do anything to hurt him."

She heard herself, heard her tone, after she had spoken, and heard it the more that, for a minute after, she felt her husband's eyes on her face, very close, too close for her to see him. He was looking at her because he was struck, and looking hard — though his answer, when it came, was straight enough. "Why, isn't that just what we have been talking about — that I've affected you as fairly studying his comfort and his pleasure? He might show his sense of it," the Prince went on, "by proposing to ME an excursion."

"And you would go with him?" Maggie immediately asked.

He hung fire but an instant. "Per Dio!"

She also had her pause, but she broke it — since gaiety was in the air — with an intense smile. "You can say that safely, because the proposal's one that, of his own motion, he won't make."

She couldn't have narrated afterwards — and in fact was at a loss to tell herself — by what transition, what rather marked abruptness of change in their personal relation, their drive came to its end with a kind of interval established, almost confessed to, between them. She felt it in the tone with which he repeated, after her, "'Safely' — ?"

"Safely as regards being thrown with him perhaps after all, in such a case, too long. He's a person to think you might easily feel yourself to be. So it won't," Maggie said, "come from father. He's too modest."

Their eyes continued to meet on it, from corner to corner of the brougham. "Oh your modesty, between you — !" But he still smiled for it. "So that unless I insist — ?"

"We shall simply go on as we are."

“Well, we’re going on beautifully,” he answered — though by no means with the effect it would have had if their mute transaction, that of attempted capture and achieved escape, had not taken place. As Maggie said nothing, none the less, to gainsay his remark, it was open to him to find himself the next moment conscious of still another idea. “I wonder if it would do. I mean for me to break in.”

“‘To break in’ — ?”

“Between your father and his wife. But there would be a way,” he said— “we can make Charlotte ask him.” And then as Maggie herself now wondered, echoing it again: “We can suggest to her to suggest to him that he shall let me take him off.”

“Oh!” said Maggie.

“Then if he asks her why I so suddenly break out she’ll be able to tell him the reason.”

They were stopping, and the footman, who had alighted, had rung at the house-door. “That you think it would be so charming?”

“That I think it would be so charming. That we’ve persuaded HER will be convincing.”

“I see,” Maggie went on while the footman came back to let them out. “I see,” she said again; though she felt a little disconcerted. What she really saw, of a sudden, was that her stepmother might report her as above all concerned for the proposal, and this brought her back her need that her father shouldn’t think her concerned in any degree for anything. She alighted the next instant with a slight sense of defeat; her husband, to let her out, had passed before her, and, a little in advance, he awaited her on the edge of the low terrace, a step high, that preceded their open entrance, on either side of which one of their servants stood. The sense of a life tremendously ordered and fixed rose before her, and there was something in Amerigo’s very face, while his eyes again met her own through the dusky lamplight, that was like a conscious reminder of it. He had answered her, just before, distinctly, and it appeared to leave her nothing to say. It was almost as if, having planned for the last word, she saw him himself enjoying it. It was almost as if — in the strangest way in the world — he were paying her back, by the production of a small pang, that of a new uneasiness, for the way she had slipped from him during their drive.

XXVIII

Maggie's new uneasiness might have had time to drop, inasmuch as she not only was conscious, during several days that followed, of no fresh indication for it to feed on, but was even struck, in quite another way, with an augmentation of the symptoms of that difference she had taken it into her head to work for. She recognised by the end of a week that if she had been in a manner caught up her father had been not less so — with the effect of her husband's and his wife's closing in, together, round them, and of their all having suddenly begun, as a party of four, to lead a life gregarious, and from that reason almost hilarious, so far as the easy sound of it went, as never before. It might have been an accident and a mere coincidence — so at least she said to herself at first; but a dozen chances that furthered the whole appearance had risen to the surface, pleasant pretexts, oh certainly pleasant, as pleasant as Amerigo in particular could make them, for associated undertakings, quite for shared adventures, for its always turning out, amusingly, that they wanted to do very much the same thing at the same time and in the same way. Funny all this was, to some extent, in the light of the fact that the father and daughter, for so long, had expressed so few positive desires; yet it would be sufficiently natural that if Amerigo and Charlotte HAD at last got a little tired of each other's company they should find their relief not so much in sinking to the rather low level of their companions as in wishing to pull the latter into the train in which they so constantly moved. "We're in the train," Maggie mutely reflected after the dinner in Eaton Square with Lady Castledean; "we've suddenly waked up in it and found ourselves rushing along, very much as if we had been put in during sleep — shoved, like a pair of labelled boxes, into the van. And since I wanted to 'go' I'm certainly going," she might have added; "I'm moving without trouble — they're doing it all for us: it's wonderful how they understand and how perfectly it succeeds." For that was the thing she had most immediately to acknowledge: it seemed as easy for them to make a quartette as it had formerly so long appeared for them to make a pair of couples — this latter being thus a discovery too absurdly belated. The only point at which, day after day, the success appeared at all qualified was represented, as might have been said, by her irresistible impulse to give her father a clutch when the train indulged in one of its occasional lurches. Then — there was no denying it — his eyes and her own met; so that they were themselves doing active violence, as against the others, to that very spirit of union, or at least to that very achievement of change, which she had taken the field to invoke.

The maximum of change was reached, no doubt, the day the Matcham party dined in Portland Place; the day, really perhaps, of Maggie's maximum of social glory, in the sense of its showing for her own occasion, her very own, with every one else extravagantly rallying and falling in, absolutely conspiring to make her its heroine. It was as if her father himself, always with more initiative as a guest than as a host, had dabbled too in the conspiracy; and the impression was not diminished by the presence of the Assinghams, likewise very much caught-up, now, after something of a lull, by the side-wind of all the rest of the motion, and giving our young woman, so far at least as Fanny was concerned, the sense of some special intention of encouragement and applause. Fanny, who had not been present at the other dinner, thanks to a preference entertained and expressed by Charlotte, made a splendid show at this one, in new orange-coloured velvet with multiplied turquoises, and with a confidence, furthermore, as different as possible, her hostess inferred, from her too-marked betrayal of a belittled state at Matcham. Maggie was not indifferent to her own opportunity to redress this balance — which seemed, for the hour, part of a general rectification; she liked making out for herself that on the high level of Portland Place, a spot exempt, on all sorts of grounds, from jealous jurisdictions, her friend could feel as "good" as any one, and could in fact at moments almost appear to take the lead in recognition and celebration, so far as the evening might conduce to intensify the lustre of the little Princess. Mrs. Assingham produced on her the impression of giving her constantly her cue for this; and it was in truth partly by her help, intelligently, quite gratefully accepted, that the little Princess, in Maggie, was drawn out and emphasised. She couldn't definitely have said how it happened, but she felt herself, for the first time in her career, living up to the public and popular notion of such a personage, as it pressed upon her from all round; rather wondering, inwardly too, while she did so, at that strange mixture in things through which the popular notion could be evidenced for her by such supposedly great ones of the earth as the Castledeans and their kind. Fanny Assingham might really have been there, at all events, like one of the assistants in the ring at the circus, to keep up the pace of the sleek revolving animal on whose back the lady in short spangled skirts should brilliantly caper and posture. That was all, doubtless Maggie had forgotten, had neglected, had

declined, to be the little Princess on anything like the scale open to her; but now that the collective hand had been held out to her with such alacrity, so that she might skip up into the light, even, as seemed to her modest mind, with such a show of pink stocking and such an abbreviation of white petticoat, she could strike herself as perceiving, under arched eyebrows, where her mistake had been. She had invited for the later hours, after her dinner, a fresh contingent, the whole list of her apparent London acquaintance — which was again a thing in the manner of little princesses for whom the princely art was a matter of course. That was what she was learning to do, to fill out as a matter of course her appointed, her expected, her imposed character; and, though there were latent considerations that somewhat interfered with the lesson, she was having to-night an inordinate quantity of practice, none of it so successful as when, quite wittingly, she directed it at Lady Castledean, who was reduced by it at last to an unprecedented state of passivity. The perception of this high result caused Mrs. Assingham fairly to flush with responsive joy; she glittered at her young friend, from moment to moment, quite feverishly; it was positively as if her young friend had, in some marvellous, sudden, supersubtle way, become a source of succour to herself, become beautifully, divinely retributive. The intensity of the taste of these registered phenomena was in fact that somehow, by a process and through a connexion not again to be traced, she so practised, at the same time, on Amerigo and Charlotte — with only the drawback, her constant check and second-thought, that she concomitantly practised perhaps still more on her father.

This last was a danger indeed that, for much of the ensuing time, had its hours of strange beguilement — those at which her sense for precautions so suffered itself to lapse that she felt her communion with him more intimate than any other. It COULDN'T but pass between them that something singular was happening — so much as this she again and again said to herself; whereby the comfort of it was there, after all, to be noted, just as much as the possible peril, and she could think of the couple they formed together as groping, with sealed lips, but with mutual looks that had never been so tender, for some freedom, some fiction, some figured bravery, under which they might safely talk of it. The moment was to come — and it finally came with an effect as penetrating as the sound that follows the pressure of an electric button — when she read the least helpful of meanings into the agitation she had created. The merely specious description of their case would have been that, after being for a long time, as a family, delightfully, uninterruptedly happy, they had still had a new felicity to discover; a felicity for which, blessedly, her father's appetite and her own, in particular, had been kept fresh and grateful. This livelier march of their intercourse as a whole was the thing that occasionally determined in him the clutching instinct we have glanced at; very much as if he had said to her, in default of her breaking silence first: "Everything is remarkably pleasant, isn't it? — but WHERE, for it, after all, are we? up in a balloon and whirling through space, or down in the depths of the earth, in the glimmering passages of a gold-mine?" The equilibrium, the precious condition, lasted in spite of rearrangement; there had been a fresh distribution of the different weights, but the balance persisted and triumphed: all of which was just the reason why she was forbidden, face to face with the companion of her adventure, the experiment of a test. If they balanced they balanced — she had to take that; it deprived her of every pretext for arriving, by however covert a process, at what he thought.

But she had her hours, thus, of feeling supremely linked to him by the rigour of their law, and when it came over her that, all the while, the wish, on his side, to spare her might be what most worked with him, this very fact of their seeming to have nothing "inward" really to talk about wrapped him up for her in a kind of sweetness that was wanting, as a consecration, even in her yearning for her husband. She was powerless, however, was only more utterly hushed, when the interrupting flash came, when she would have been all ready to say to him, "Yes, this is by every appearance the best time we've had yet; but don't you see, all the same, how they must be working together for it, and how my very success, my success in shifting our beautiful harmony to a new basis, comes round to being their success, above all; their cleverness, their amiability, their power to hold out, their complete possession, in short, of our life?" For how could she say as much as that without saying a great deal more? without saying "They'll do everything in the world that suits us, save only one thing — prescribe a line for us that will make them separate." How could she so much as imagine herself even faintly murmuring that without putting into his mouth the very words that would have made her quail? "Separate, my dear? Do you want them to separate? Then you want US to — you and me? For how can the one separation take place without the other?" That was the question that, in spirit, she had heard him ask — with its dread train, moreover, of involved and connected inquiries. Their own separation, his and hers, was of course perfectly thinkable, but only on the basis of the sharpest of reasons. Well, the

sharpest, the very sharpest, would be that they could no longer afford, as it were, he to let his wife, she to let her husband, "run" them in such compact formation. And say they accepted this account of their situation as a practical finality, acting upon it and proceeding to a division, would no sombre ghosts of the smothered past, on either side, show, across the widening strait, pale unappeased faces, or raise, in the very passage, deprecating, denouncing hands?

Meanwhile, however such things might be, she was to have occasion to say to herself that there might be but a deeper treachery in recoveries and reassurances. She was to feel alone again, as she had felt at the issue of her high tension with her husband during their return from meeting the Castledeans in Eaton Square. The evening in question had left her with a larger alarm, but then a lull had come — the alarm, after all, was yet to be confirmed. There came an hour, inevitably, when she knew, with a chill, what she had feared and why; it had taken, this hour, a month to arrive, but to find it before her was thoroughly to recognise it, for it showed her sharply what Amerigo had meant in alluding to a particular use that they might make, for their reaffirmed harmony and prosperity, of Charlotte. The more she thought, at present, of the tone he had employed to express their enjoyment of this resource, the more it came back to her as the product of a conscious art of dealing with her. He had been conscious, at the moment, of many things — conscious even, not a little, of desiring; and thereby of needing, to see what she would do in a given case. The given case would be that of her being to a certain extent, as she might fairly make it out, MENACED — horrible as it was to impute to him any intention represented by such a word. Why it was that to speak of making her stepmother intervene, as they might call it, in a question that seemed, just then and there, quite peculiarly their own business — why it was that a turn so familiar and so easy should, at the worst, strike her as charged with the spirit of a threat, was an oddity disconnected, for her, temporarily, from its grounds, the adventure of an imagination within her that possibly had lost its way. That, precisely, was doubtless why she had learned to wait, as the weeks passed by, with a fair, or rather indeed with an excessive, imitation of resumed serenity. There had been no prompt sequel to the Prince's equivocal light, and that made for patience; yet she was none the less to have to admit, after delay, that the bread he had cast on the waters had come home, and that she should thus be justified of her old apprehension. The consequence of this, in turn, was a renewed pang in presence of his remembered ingenuity. To be ingenious with HER — what DIDN'T, what mightn't that mean, when she had so absolutely never, at any point of contact with him, put him, by as much as the value of a penny, to the expense of sparing, doubting, fearing her, of having in any way whatever to reckon with her? The ingenuity had been in his simply speaking of their use of Charlotte as if it were common to them in an equal degree, and his triumph, on the occasion, had been just in the simplicity. She couldn't — and he knew it — say what was true: "Oh, you 'use' her, and I use her, if you will, yes; but we use her ever so differently and separately — not at all in the same way or degree. There's nobody we really use together but ourselves, don't you see? — by which I mean that where our interests are the same I can so beautifully, so exquisitely serve you for everything, and you can so beautifully, so exquisitely serve me. The only person either of us needs is the other of us; so why, as a matter of course, in such a case as this, drag in Charlotte?"

She couldn't so challenge him, because it would have been — and there she was paralysed — the NOTE. It would have translated itself on the spot, for his ear, into jealousy; and, from reverberation to repercussion, would have reached her father's exactly in the form of a cry piercing the stillness of peaceful sleep. It had been for many days almost as difficult for her to catch a quiet twenty minutes with her father as it had formerly been easy; there had been in fact, of old — the time, so strangely, seemed already far away — an inevitability in her longer passages with him, a sort of domesticated beauty in the calculability, round about them, of everything. But at present Charlotte was almost always there when Amerigo brought her to Eaton Square, where Amerigo was constantly bringing her; and Amerigo was almost always there when Charlotte brought her husband to Portland Place, where Charlotte was constantly bringing HIM. The fractions of occasions, the chance minutes that put them face to face had, as yet, of late, contrived to count but little, between them, either for the sense of opportunity or for that of exposure; inasmuch as the lifelong rhythm of their intercourse made against all cursory handling of deep things. They had never availed themselves of any given quarter-of-an-hour to gossip about fundamentals; they moved slowly through large still spaces; they could be silent together, at any time, beautifully, with much more comfort than hurriedly expressive. It appeared indeed to have become true that their common appeal measured itself, for vividness, just by this economy of sound; they might have been talking "at" each other when they talked with their companions, but these latter, assuredly, were not in any directer way to gain light on the current phase of their relation. Such

were some of the reasons for which Maggie suspected fundamentals, as I have called them, to be rising, by a new movement, to the surface — suspected it one morning late in May, when her father presented himself in Portland Place alone. He had his pretext — of that she was fully aware: the Principino, two days before, had shown signs, happily not persistent, of a feverish cold and had notoriously been obliged to spend the interval at home. This was ground, ample ground, for punctual inquiry; but what it wasn't ground for, she quickly found herself reflecting, was his having managed, in the interest of his visit, to dispense so unwontedly — as their life had recently come to be arranged — with his wife's attendance. It had so happened that she herself was, for the hour, exempt from her husband's, and it will at once be seen that the hour had a quality all its own when I note that, remembering how the Prince had looked in to say he was going out, the Princess whimsically wondered if their respective sposi mightn't frankly be meeting, whimsically hoped indeed they were temporarily so disposed of. Strange was her need, at moments, to think of them as not attaching an excessive importance to their repudiation of the general practice that had rested only a few weeks before on such a consecrated rightness. Repudiations, surely, were not in the air — they had none of them come to that; for wasn't she at this minute testifying directly against them by her own behaviour? When she should confess to fear of being alone with her father, to fear of what he might then — ah, with such a slow, painful motion as she had a horror of! — say to her, THEN would be time enough for Amerigo and Charlotte to confess to not liking to appear to foregather.

She had this morning a wonderful consciousness both of dreading a particular question from him and of being able to check, yes even to disconcert, magnificently, by her apparent manner of receiving it, any restless imagination he might have about its importance. The day, bright and soft, had the breath of summer; it made them talk, to begin with, of Fawns, of the way Fawns invited — Maggie aware, the while, that in thus regarding, with him, the sweetness of its invitation to one couple just as much as to another, her humbugging smile grew very nearly convulsive. That was it, and there was relief truly, of a sort, in taking it in: she was humbugging him already, by absolute necessity, as she had never, never done in her life — doing it up to the full height of what she had allowed for. The necessity, in the great dimly-shining room where, declining, for his reasons, to sit down, he moved about in Amerigo's very footsteps, the necessity affected her as pressing upon her with the very force of the charm itself; of the old pleasantness, between them, so candidly playing up there again; of the positive flatness of their tenderness, a surface all for familiar use, quite as if generalised from the long succession of tapestried sofas, sweetly faded, on which his theory of contentment had sat, through unmeasured pauses, beside her own. She KNEW, from this instant, knew in advance and as well as anything would ever teach her, that she must never intermit for a solitary second her so highly undertaking to prove that there was nothing the matter with her. She saw, of a sudden, everything she might say or do in the light of that undertaking, established connections from it with any number of remote matters, struck herself, for instance, as acting all in its interest when she proposed their going out, in the exercise of their freedom and in homage to the season, for a turn in the Regent's Park. This resort was close at hand, at the top of Portland Place, and the Principino, beautifully better, had already proceeded there under high attendance: all of which considerations were defensive for Maggie, all of which became, to her mind, part of the business of cultivating continuity.

Upstairs, while she left him to put on something to go out in, the thought of his waiting below for her, in possession of the empty house, brought with it, sharply if briefly, one of her abrupt arrests of consistency, the brush of a vain imagination almost paralysing her, often, for the minute, before her glass — the vivid look, in other words, of the particular difference his marriage had made. The particular difference seemed at such instants the loss, more than anything else, of their old freedom, their never having had to think, where they were together concerned, of any one, of anything but each other. It hadn't been HER marriage that did it; that had never, for three seconds, suggested to either of them that they must act diplomatically, must reckon with another presence — no, not even with her husband's. She groaned to herself, while the vain imagination lasted, "WHY did he marry? ah, why DID he?" and then it came up to her more than ever that nothing could have been more beautiful than the way in which, till Charlotte came so much more closely into their life, Amerigo hadn't interfered. What she had gone on owing him for this mounted up again, to her eyes, like a column of figures — or call it even, if one would, a house of cards; it was her father's wonderful act that had tipped the house down and made the sum wrong. With all of which, immediately after her question, her "Why did he, why did he?" rushed back, inevitably, the confounding, the overwhelming wave of the knowledge of his reason. "He did it for ME, he did it for me," she moaned, "he did it, exactly, that our freedom — meaning,

beloved man, simply and solely mine — should be greater instead of less; he did it, divinely, to liberate me so far as possible from caring what became of him." She found time upstairs, even in her haste, as she had repeatedly found time before, to let the wonderments involved in these recognitions flash at her with their customary effect of making her blink: the question in especial of whether she might find her solution in acting, herself, in the spirit of what he had done, in forcing her "care" really to grow as much less as he had tried to make it. Thus she felt the whole weight of their case drop afresh upon her shoulders, was confronted, unmistakably, with the prime source of her haunted state. It all came from her not having been able not to mind — not to mind what became of him; not having been able, without anxiety, to let him go his way and take his risk and lead his life. She had made anxiety her stupid little idol; and absolutely now, while she stuck a long pin, a trifle fallaciously, into her hat — she had, with an approach to irritation, told her maid, a new woman, whom she had lately found herself thinking of as abysmal, that she didn't want her — she tried to focus the possibility of some understanding between them in consequence of which he should cut loose.

Very near indeed it looked, any such possibility! that consciousness, too, had taken its turn by the time she was ready; all the vibration, all the emotion of this present passage being, precisely, in the very sweetness of their lapse back into the conditions of the simpler time, into a queer resemblance between the aspect and the feeling of the moment and those of numberless other moments that were sufficiently far away. She had been quick in her preparation, in spite of the flow of the tide that sometimes took away her breath; but a pause, once more, was still left for her to make, a pause, at the top of the stairs, before she came down to him, in the span of which she asked herself if it weren't thinkable, from the perfectly practical point of view, that she should simply sacrifice him. She didn't go into the detail of what sacrificing him would mean — she didn't need to; so distinct was it, in one of her restless lights, that there he was awaiting her, that she should find him walking up and down the drawing-room in the warm, fragrant air to which the open windows and the abundant flowers contributed; slowly and vaguely moving there and looking very slight and young and, superficially, manageable, almost as much like her child, putting it a little freely, as like her parent; with the appearance about him, above all, of having perhaps arrived just on purpose to SAY it to her, himself, in so many words: "Sacrifice me, my own love; do sacrifice me, do sacrifice me!" Should she want to, should she insist on it, she might verily hear him bleating it at her, all conscious and all accommodating, like some precious, spotless, exceptionally intelligent lamb. The positive effect of the intensity of this figure, however, was to make her shake it away in her resumed descent; and after she had rejoined him, after she had picked him up, she was to know the full pang of the thought that her impossibility was MADE, absolutely, by his consciousness, by the lucidity of his intention: this she felt while she smiled there for him, again, all hypocritically; while she drew on fair, fresh gloves; while she interrupted the process first to give his necktie a slightly smarter twist and then to make up to him for her hidden madness by rubbing her nose into his cheek according to the tradition of their frankest levity.

From the instant she should be able to convict him of intending, every issue would be closed and her hypocrisy would have to redouble. The only way to sacrifice him would be to do so without his dreaming what it might be for. She kissed him, she arranged his cravat, she dropped remarks, she guided him out, she held his arm, not to be led, but to lead him, and taking it to her by much the same intimate pressure she had always used, when a little girl, to mark the inseparability of her doll — she did all these things so that he should sufficiently fail to dream of what they might be for.

XXIX

There was nothing to show that her effort in any degree fell short till they got well into the Park and he struck her as giving, unexpectedly, the go-by to any serious search for the Principino. The way they sat down awhile in the sun was a sign of that; his dropping with her into the first pair of sequestered chairs they came across and waiting a little, after they were placed, as if now at last she might bring out, as between them, something more specific. It made her but feel the more sharply how the specific, in almost any direction, was utterly forbidden her — how the use of it would be, for all the world, like undoing the leash of a dog eager to follow up a scent. It would come out, the specific, where the dog would come out; would run to earth, somehow, the truth — for she was believing herself in relation to the truth! — at which she mustn't so much as indirectly point. Such, at any rate, was the fashion in which her passionate prudence played over possibilities of danger, reading symptoms and betrayals into everything she looked at, and yet having to make it evident, while she recognised them, that she didn't wince. There were moments between them, in their chairs, when he might have been watching her guard herself and trying to think of something new that would trip her up. There were pauses during which, with her affection as sweet and still as the sunshine, she might yet, as at some hard game, over a table, for money, have been defying him to fasten upon her the least little complication of consciousness. She was positively proud, afterwards, of the great style in which she had kept this up; later on, at the hour's end, when they had retraced their steps to find Amerigo and Charlotte awaiting them at the house, she was able to say to herself that, truly, she had put her plan through; even though once more setting herself the difficult task of making their relation, every minute of the time, not fall below the standard of that other hour, in the treasured past, which hung there behind them like a framed picture in a museum, a high watermark for the history of their old fortune; the summer evening, in the park at Fawns, when, side by side under the trees just as now, they had let their happy confidence lull them with its most golden tone. There had been the possibility of a trap for her, at present, in the very question of their taking up anew that residence; wherefore she had not been the first to sound it, in spite of the impression from him of his holding off to see what she would do. She was saying to herself in secret: "CAN we again, in this form, migrate there? Can I, for myself, undertake it? face all the intenser keeping-up and stretching-out, indefinitely, impossibly, that our conditions in the country, as we've established and accepted them, would stand for?" She had positively lost herself in this inward doubt — so much she was subsequently to remember; but remembering then too that her companion, though perceptibly perhaps as if not to be eager, had broken the ice very much as he had broken it in Eaton Square after the banquet to the Castledeans.

Her mind had taken a long excursion, wandered far into the vision of what a summer at Fawns, with Amerigo and Charlotte still more eminently in presence against that higher sky, would bring forth. Wasn't her father meanwhile only pretending to talk of it? just as she was, in a manner, pretending to listen? He got off it, finally, at all events, for the transition it couldn't well help thrusting out at him; it had amounted exactly to an arrest of her private excursion by the sense that he had begun to IMITATE — oh, as never yet! — the ancient tone of gold. It had verily come from him at last, the question of whether she thought it would be very good — but very good indeed — that he should leave England for a series of weeks, on some pretext, with the Prince. Then it had been that she was to know her husband's "menace" hadn't really dropped, since she was face to face with the effect of it. Ah, the effect of it had occupied all the rest of their walk, had stayed out with them and come home with them, besides making it impossible that they shouldn't presently feign to recollect how rejoining the child had been their original purpose. Maggie's uneffaced note was that it had, at the end of five minutes more, driven them to that endeavour as to a refuge, and caused them afterwards to rejoice, as well, that the boy's irrepressibly importunate company, in due course secured and enjoyed, with the extension imparted by his governess, a person expectant of consideration, constituted a cover for any awkwardness. For that was what it had all come to, that the dear man had spoken to her to TRY her — quite as he had been spoken to himself by Charlotte, with the same fine idea. The Princess took it in, on the spot, firmly grasping it; she heard them together, her father and his wife, dealing with the queer case. "The Prince tells me that Maggie has a plan for your taking some foreign journey with him, and, as he likes to do everything she wants, he has suggested my speaking to you for it as the thing most likely to make you consent. So I do speak — see? — being always so eager myself, as you know, to meet Maggie's wishes. I speak, but without quite understanding, this time, what she has in her head. Why SHOULD she, of a sudden, at this particular

moment, desire to ship you off together and to remain here alone with me? The compliment's all to me, I admit, and you must decide quite as you like. The Prince is quite ready, evidently, to do his part — but you'll have it out with him. That is you'll have it out with HER." Something of that kind was what, in her mind's ear, Maggie heard — and this, after his waiting for her to appeal to him directly, was her father's invitation to her to have it out. Well, as she could say to herself all the rest of the day, that was what they did while they continued to sit there in their penny chairs, that was what they HAD done as much as they would now ever, ever, have out anything. The measure of this, at least, had been given, that each would fight to the last for the protection, for the perversion, of any real anxiety. She had confessed, instantly, with her humbugging grin, not flinching by a hair, meeting his eyes as mildly as he met hers, she had confessed to her fancy that they might both, he and his son-in-law, have welcomed such an escapade, since they had both been so long so furiously domestic. She had almost cocked her hat under the inspiration of this opportunity to hint how a couple of spirited young men, reacting from confinement and sallying forth arm-in-arm, might encounter the agreeable in forms that would strike them for the time at least as novel. She had felt for fifty seconds, with her eyes, all so sweetly and falsely, in her companion's, horribly vulgar; yet without minding it either — such luck should she have if to be nothing worse than vulgar would see her through. "And I thought Amerigo might like it better," she had said, "than wandering off alone."

"Do you mean that he won't go unless I take him?"

She had considered here, and never in her life had she considered so promptly and so intently. If she really put it that way, her husband, challenged, might belie the statement; so that what would that do but make her father wonder, make him perhaps ask straight out, why she was exerting pressure? She couldn't of course afford to be suspected for an instant of exerting pressure; which was why she was obliged only to make answer: "Wouldn't that be just what you must have out with HIM?"

"Decidedly — if he makes me the proposal. But he hasn't made it yet."

Oh, once more, how she was to feel she had smirked! "Perhaps he's too shy!"

"Because you're so sure he so really wants my company?"

"I think he has thought you might like it."

"Well, I should — !" But with this he looked away from her, and she held her breath to hear him either ask if she wished him to address the question to Amerigo straight, or inquire if she should be greatly disappointed by his letting it drop. What had "settled" her, as she was privately to call it, was that he had done neither of these things, and had thereby markedly stood off from the risk involved in trying to draw out her reason. To attenuate, on the other hand, this appearance, and quite as if to fill out the too large receptacle made, so musingly, by his abstention, he had himself presently given her a reason — had positively spared her the effort of asking whether he judged Charlotte not to have approved. He had taken everything on himself — THAT was what had settled her. She had had to wait very little more to feel, with this, how much he was taking. The point he made was his lack of any eagerness to put time and space, on any such scale, between himself and his wife. He wasn't so unhappy with her — far from it, and Maggie was to hold that he had grinned back, paternally, through his rather shielding glasses, in easy emphasis of this — as to be able to hint that he required the relief of absence. Therefore, unless it was for the Prince himself — !

"Oh, I don't think it would have been for Amerigo himself. Amerigo and I," Maggie had said, "perfectly rub on together."

"Well then, there we are."

"I see" — and she had again, with sublime blandness, assented. "There we are."

"Charlotte and I too," her father had gaily proceeded, "perfectly rub on together." And then he had appeared for a little to be making time. "To put it only so," he had mildly and happily added— "to put it only so!" He had spoken as if he might easily put it much better, yet as if the humour of contented understatement fairly sufficed for the occasion. He had played then, either all consciously or all unconsciously, into Charlotte's hands; and the effect of this was to render trebly oppressive Maggie's conviction of Charlotte's plan. She had done what she wanted, his wife had — which was also what Amerigo had made her do. She had kept her test, Maggie's test, from becoming possible, and had applied instead a test of her own. It was exactly as if she had known that her stepdaughter would be afraid to be summoned to say, under the least approach to cross-examination, why any change was desirable; and it was, for our young woman herself, still more prodigiously, as if her father had been capable of calculations to match, of judging it important he shouldn't be brought to demand of her what was the matter with her. Why otherwise, with such an opportunity, hadn't

he demanded it? Always from calculation — that was why, that was why. He was terrified of the retort he might have invoked: “What, my dear, if you come to that, is the matter with YOU?” When, a minute later on, he had followed up his last note by a touch or two designed still further to conjure away the ghost of the anomalous, at that climax verily she would have had to be dumb to the question. “There seems a kind of charm, doesn’t there? on our life — and quite as if, just lately, it had got itself somehow renewed, had waked up refreshed. A kind of wicked selfish prosperity perhaps, as if we had grabbed everything, fixed everything, down to the last lovely object for the last glass case of the last corner, left over, of my old show. That’s the only take-off, that it has made us perhaps lazy, a wee bit languid — lying like gods together, all careless of mankind.”

“Do you consider that we’re languid?” — that form of rejoinder she had jumped at for the sake of its pretty lightness. “Do you consider that we are careless of mankind? — living as we do in the biggest crowd in the world, and running about always pursued and pursuing.”

It had made him think indeed a little longer than she had meant; but he came up again, as she might have said, smiling. “Well, I don’t know. We get nothing but the fun, do we?”

“No,” she had hastened to declare; “we certainly get nothing but the fun.”

“We do it all,” he had remarked, “so beautifully.”

“We do it all so beautifully.” She hadn’t denied this for a moment. “I see what you mean.”

“Well, I mean too,” he had gone on, “that we haven’t, no doubt, enough, the sense of difficulty.”

“Enough? Enough for what?”

“Enough not to be selfish.”

“I don’t think YOU are selfish,” she had returned — and had managed not to wail it.

“I don’t say that it’s me particularly — or that it’s you or Charlotte or Amerigo. But we’re selfish together — we move as a selfish mass. You see we want always the same thing,” he had gone on— “and that holds us, that binds us, together. We want each other,” he had further explained; “only wanting it, each time, FOR each other. That’s what I call the happy spell; but it’s also, a little, possibly, the immorality.”

“‘The immorality’?” she had pleasantly echoed.

“Well, we’re tremendously moral for ourselves — that is for each other; and I won’t pretend that I know exactly at whose particular personal expense you and I, for instance, are happy. What it comes to, I daresay, is that there’s something haunting — as if it were a bit uncanny — in such a consciousness of our general comfort and privilege. Unless indeed,” he had rambled on, “it’s only I to whom, fantastically, it says so much. That’s all I mean, at any rate — that it’s sort of soothing; as if we were sitting about on divans, with pigtails, smoking opium and seeing visions. ‘Let us then be up and doing’ — what is it Longfellow says? That seems sometimes to ring out; like the police breaking in — into our opium den — to give us a shake. But the beauty of it is, at the same time, that we ARE doing; we’re doing, that is, after all, what we went in for. We’re working it, our life, our chance, whatever you may call it, as we saw it, as we felt it, from the first. We HAVE worked it, and what more can you do than that? It’s a good deal for me,” he had wound up, “to have made Charlotte so happy — to have so perfectly contented her. YOU, from a good way back, were a matter of course — I mean your being all right; so that I needn’t mind your knowing that my great interest, since then, has rather inevitably been in making sure of the same success, very much to your advantage as well, for Charlotte. If we’ve worked our life, our idea really, as I say — if at any rate I can sit here and say that I’ve worked my share of it — it has not been what you may call least by our having put Charlotte so at her ease. THAT has been soothing, all round; that has curled up as the biggest of the blue fumes, or whatever they are, of the opium. Don’t you see what a cropper we would have come if she hadn’t settled down as she has?” And he had concluded by turning to Maggie as for something she mightn’t really have thought of. “You, darling, in that case, I verily believe, would have been the one to hate it most.”

“To hate it — ?” Maggie had wondered.

“To hate our having, with our tremendous intentions, not brought it off. And I daresay I should have hated it for you even more than for myself.”

“That’s not unlikely perhaps when it was for me, after all, that you did it.”

He had hesitated, but only a moment. “I never told you so.”

“Well, Charlotte herself soon enough told me.”

“But I never told HER,” her father had answered.

“Are you very sure?” she had presently asked.

"Well, I like to think how thoroughly I was taken with her, and how right I was, and how fortunate, to have that for my basis. I told her all the good I thought of her."

"Then that," Maggie had returned, "was precisely part of the good. I mean it was precisely part of it that she could so beautifully understand."

"Yes — understand everything."

"Everything — and in particular your reasons. Her telling me — that showed me how she had understood."

They were face to face again now, and she saw she had made his colour rise; it was as if he were still finding in her eyes the concrete image, the enacted scene, of her passage with Charlotte, which he was now hearing of for the first time and as to which it would have been natural he should question her further. His forbearance to do so would but mark, precisely, the complication of his fears. "What she does like," he finally said, "is the way it has succeeded."

"Your marriage?"

"Yes — my whole idea. The way I've been justified. That's the joy I give her. If for HER, either, it had failed — !" That, however, was not worth talking about; he had broken off. "You think then you could now risk Fawns?"

"'Risk' it?"

"Well, morally — from the point of view I was talking of; that of our sinking deeper into sloth. Our selfishness, somehow, seems at its biggest down there."

Maggie had allowed him the amusement of her not taking this up. "Is Charlotte," she had simply asked, "really ready?"

"Oh, if you and I and Amerigo are. Whenever one corners Charlotte," he had developed more at his ease, "one finds that she only wants to know what we want. Which is what we got her for!"

"What we got her for — exactly!" And so, for a little, even though with a certain effect of oddity in their more or less successful ease, they left it; left it till Maggie made the remark that it was all the same wonderful her stepmother should be willing, before the season was out, to exchange so much company for so much comparative solitude.

"Ah," he had then made answer, "that's because her idea, I think, this time, is that we shall have more people, more than we've hitherto had, in the country. Don't you remember that THAT, originally, was what we were to get her for?"

"Oh yes — to give us a life." Maggie had gone through the form of recalling this, and the light of their ancient candour, shining from so far back, had seemed to bring out some things so strangely that, with the sharpness of the vision, she had risen to her feet. "Well, with a 'life' Fawns will certainly do." He had remained in his place while she looked over his head; the picture, in her vision, had suddenly swarmed. The vibration was that of one of the lurches of the mystic train in which, with her companion, she was travelling; but she was having to steady herself, this time, before meeting his eyes. She had measured indeed the full difference between the move to Fawns because each of them now knew the others wanted it and the pairing-off, for a journey, of her husband and her father, which nobody knew that either wanted. "More company" at Fawns would be effectually enough the key in which her husband and her stepmother were at work; there was truly no question but that she and her father must accept any array of visitors. No one could try to marry him now. What he had just said was a direct plea for that, and what was the plea itself but an act of submission to Charlotte? He had, from his chair, been noting her look, but he had, the next minute, also risen, and then it was they had reminded each other of their having come out for the boy. Their junction with him and with his companion successfully effected, the four had moved home more slowly, and still more vaguely; yet with a vagueness that permitted of Maggie's reverting an instant to the larger issue.

"If we have people in the country then, as you were saying, do you know for whom my first fancy would be? You may be amused, but it would be for the Castledeans."

"I see. But why should I be amused?"

"Well, I mean I am myself. I don't think I like her — and yet I like to see her: which, as Amerigo says, is 'rum.'"

"But don't you feel she's very handsome?" her father inquired.

"Yes, but it isn't for that."

"Then what is it for?"

"Simply that she may be THERE — just there before us. It's as if she may have a value — as if something may come of her. I don't in the least know what, and she rather irritates me meanwhile. I don't even know, I admit, why — but if we see her often enough I may find out."

"Does it matter so very much?" her companion had asked while they moved together.

She had hesitated. "You mean because you do rather like her?"

He on his side too had waited a little, but then he had taken it from her. "Yes, I guess I do rather like her."

Which she accepted for the first case she could recall of their not being affected by a person in the same way. It came back therefore to his pretending; but she had gone far enough, and to add to her appearance of levity she further observed that, though they were so far from a novelty, she should also immediately desire, at Fawns, the presence of the Assinghams. That put everything on a basis independent of explanations; yet it was extraordinary, at the same time, how much, once in the country again with the others, she was going, as they used to say at home, to need the presence of the good Fanny. It was the strangest thing in the world, but it was as if Mrs. Assingham might in a manner mitigate the intensity of her consciousness of Charlotte. It was as if the two would balance, one against the other; as if it came round again in that fashion to her idea of the equilibrium. It would be like putting this friend into her scale to make weight — into the scale with her father and herself. Amerigo and Charlotte would be in the other; therefore it would take the three of them to keep that one straight. And as this played, all duskily, in her mind it had received from her father, with a sound of suddenness, a luminous contribution. "Ah, rather! DO let's have the Assinghams."

"It would be to have them," she had said, "as we used so much to have them. For a good long stay, in the old way and on the old terms: 'as regular boarders' Fanny used to call it. That is if they'll come."

"As regular boarders, on the old terms — that's what I should like too. But I guess they'll come," her companion had added in a tone into which she had read meanings. The main meaning was that he felt he was going to require them quite as much as she was. His recognition of the new terms as different from the old, what was that, practically, but a confession that something had happened, and a perception that, interested in the situation she had helped to create, Mrs. Assingham would be, by so much as this, concerned in its inevitable development? It amounted to an intimation, off his guard, that he should be thankful for some one to turn to. If she had wished covertly to sound him he had now, in short, quite given himself away, and if she had, even at the start, needed anything MORE to settle her, here assuredly was enough. He had hold of his small grandchild as they retraced their steps, swinging the boy's hand and not bored, as he never was, by his always bristling, like a fat little porcupine, with shrill interrogation-points — so that, secretly, while they went, she had wondered again if the equilibrium mightn't have been more real, mightn't above all have demanded less strange a study, had it only been on the books that Charlotte should give him a Principino of his own. She had repossessed herself now of his other arm, only this time she was drawing him back, gently, helplessly back, to what they had tried, for the hour, to get away from — just as he was consciously drawing the child, and as high Miss Bogle on her left, representing the duties of home, was complacently drawing HER. The duties of home, when the house in Portland Place reappeared, showed, even from a distance, as vividly there before them. Amerigo and Charlotte had come in — that is Amerigo had, Charlotte, rather, having come out — and the pair were perched together in the balcony, he bare-headed, she divested of her jacket, her mantle, or whatever, but crowned with a brilliant brave hat, responsive to the balmy day, which Maggie immediately "spotted" as new, as insuperably original, as worn, in characteristic generous harmony, for the first time; all, evidently, to watch for the return of the absent, to be there to take them over again as punctually as possible. They were gay, they were amused, in the pleasant morning; they leaned across the rail and called down their greeting, lighting up the front of the great black house with an expression that quite broke the monotony, that might almost have shocked the decency, of Portland Place. The group on the pavement stared up as at the peopled battlements of a castle; even Miss Bogle, who carried her head most aloft, gaped a little, through the interval of space, as toward truly superior beings. There could scarce have been so much of the open mouth since the dingy waits, on Christmas Eve, had so lamentably chanted for pennies — the time when Amerigo, insatiable for English customs, had come out, with a gasped "Santissima Vergine!" to marvel at the depositaries of this tradition and purchase a reprieve. Maggie's individual gape was inevitably again for the thought of how the pair would be at work.

XXX

She had not again, for weeks, had Mrs. Assingham so effectually in presence as on the afternoon of that lady's return from the Easter party at Matcham; but the intermission was made up as soon as the date of the migration to Fawns — that of the more or less simultaneous adjournment of the two houses — began to be discussed. It had struck her, promptly, that this renewal, with an old friend, of the old terms she had talked of with her father, was the one opening, for her spirit, that wouldn't too much advertise or betray her. Even her father, who had always, as he would have said, "believed in" their ancient ally, wouldn't necessarily suspect her of invoking Fanny's aid toward any special inquiry — and least of all if Fanny would only act as Fanny so easily might. Maggie's measure of Fanny's ease would have been agitating to Mrs. Assingham had it been all at once revealed to her — as, for that matter, it was soon destined to become even on a comparatively graduated showing. Our young woman's idea, in particular, was that her safety, her escape from being herself suspected of suspicion, would proceed from this friend's power to cover, to protect and, as might be, even showily to represent her — represent, that is, her relation to the form of the life they were all actually leading. This would doubtless be, as people said, a large order; but that Mrs. Assingham existed, substantially, or could somehow be made prevailingly to exist, for her private benefit, was the finest flower Maggie had plucked from among the suggestions sown, like abundant seed, on the occasion of the entertainment offered in Portland Place to the Matcham company. Mrs. Assingham, that night, rebounding from dejection, had bristled with bravery and sympathy; she had then absolutely, she had perhaps recklessly, for herself, betrayed the deeper and darker consciousness — an impression it would now be late for her inconsistently to attempt to undo. It was with a wonderful air of giving out all these truths that the Princess at present approached her again; making doubtless at first a sufficient scruple of letting her know what in especial she asked of her, yet not a bit ashamed, as she in fact quite expressly declared, of Fanny's discerned foreboding of the strange uses she might perhaps have for her. Quite from the first, really, Maggie said extraordinary things to her, such as "You can help me, you know, my dear, when nobody else can;" such as "I almost wish, upon my word, that you had something the matter with you, that you had lost your health, or your money, or your reputation (forgive me, love!) so that I might be with you as much as I want, or keep you with ME, without exciting comment, without exciting any other remark than that such kindnesses are 'like' me." We have each our own way of making up for our unselfishness, and Maggie, who had no small self at all as against her husband or her father and only a weak and uncertain one as against her stepmother, would verily, at this crisis, have seen Mrs. Assingham's personal life or liberty sacrificed without a pang.

The attitude that the appetite in question maintained in her was to draw peculiar support moreover from the current aspects and agitations of her victim. This personage struck her, in truth, as ready for almost anything; as not perhaps effusively protesting, yet as wanting with a restlessness of her own to know what she wanted. And in the long run — which was none so long either — there was to be no difficulty, as happened, about that. It was as if, for all the world, Maggie had let her see that she held her, that she made her, fairly responsible for something; not, to begin with, dotting all the i's nor hooking together all the links, but treating her, without insistence, rather with caressing confidence, as there to see and to know, to advise and to assist. The theory, visibly, had patched itself together for her that the dear woman had somehow, from the early time, had a hand in ALL their fortunes, so that there was no turn of their common relations and affairs that couldn't be traced back in some degree to her original affectionate interest. On this affectionate interest the good lady's young friend now built, before her eyes — very much as a wise, or even as a mischievous, child, playing on the floor, might pile up blocks, skilfully and dizzily, with an eye on the face of a covertly-watching elder.

When the blocks tumbled down they but acted after the nature of blocks; yet the hour would come for their rising so high that the structure would have to be noticed and admired. Mrs. Assingham's appearance of unreservedly giving herself involved meanwhile, on her own side, no separate recognitions: her face of almost anxious attention was directed altogether to her young friend's so vivid felicity; it suggested that she took for granted, at the most, certain vague recent enhancements of that state. If the Princess now, more than before, was going and going, she was prompt to publish that she beheld her go, that she had always known she WOULD, sooner or later, and that any appeal for participation must more or less contain and invite the note of triumph. There was a blankness in her blandness, assuredly, and very nearly an extravagance in her

generalising gaiety; a precipitation of cheer particularly marked whenever they met again after short separations: meetings during the first flush of which Maggie sometimes felt reminded of other looks in other faces; of two strangely unobliterated impressions above all, the physiognomic light that had played out in her husband at the shock — she had come at last to talk to herself of the "shock" — of his first vision of her on his return from Matcham and Gloucester, and the wonder of Charlotte's beautiful bold wavering gaze when, the next morning in Eaton Square, this old friend had turned from the window to begin to deal with her.

If she had dared to think of it so crudely she would have said that Fanny was afraid of her, afraid of something she might say or do, even as, for their few brief seconds, Amerigo and Charlotte had been — which made, exactly, an expressive element common to the three. The difference however was that this look had in the dear woman its oddity of a constant renewal, whereas it had never for the least little instant again peeped out of the others. Other looks, other lights, radiant and steady, with the others, had taken its place, reaching a climax so short a time ago, that morning of the appearance of the pair on the balcony of her house to overlook what she had been doing with her father; when their general interested brightness and beauty, attuned to the outbreak of summer, had seemed to shed down warmth and welcome and the promise of protection. They were conjoined not to do anything to startle her — and now at last so completely that, with experience and practice, they had almost ceased to fear their liability. Mrs. Assingham, on the other hand, deprecating such an accident not less, had yet less assurance, as having less control. The high pitch of her cheer, accordingly, the tentative, adventurous expressions, of the would-be smiling order, that preceded her approach even like a squad of skirmishers, or whatever they were called, moving ahead of the baggage train — these things had at the end of a fortnight brought a dozen times to our young woman's lips a challenge that had the cunning to await its right occasion, but of the relief of which, as a demonstration, she meanwhile felt no little need. "You've such a dread of my possibly complaining to you that you keep pealing all the bells to drown my voice; but don't cry out, my dear, till you're hurt — and above all ask yourself how I can be so wicked as to complain. What in the name of all that's fantastic can you dream that I have to complain OF?" Such inquiries the Princess temporarily succeeded in repressing, and she did so, in a measure, by the aid of her wondering if this ambiguity with which her friend affected her wouldn't be at present a good deal like the ambiguity with which she herself must frequently affect her father. She wondered how she should enjoy, on HIS part, such a take-up as she but just succeeded, from day to day, in sparing Mrs. Assingham, and that made for her trying to be as easy with this associate as Mr. Verver, blessed man, all indulgent but all inscrutable, was with his daughter. She had extracted from her, none the less, a vow in respect to the time that, if the Colonel might be depended on, they would spend at Fawns; and nothing came home to her more, in this connection, or inspired her with a more intimate interest, than her sense of absolutely seeing her interlocutress forbear to observe that Charlotte's view of a long visit, even from such allies, was there to be reckoned with.

Fanny stood off from that proposition as visibly to the Princess, and as consciously to herself, as she might have backed away from the edge of a chasm into which she feared to slip; a truth that contributed again to keep before our young woman her own constant danger of advertising her subtle processes. That Charlotte should have begun to be restrictive about the Assinghams — which she had never, and for a hundred obviously good reasons, been before — this in itself was a fact of the highest value for Maggie, and of a value enhanced by the silence in which Fanny herself so much too unmistakably dressed it. What gave it quite thrillingly its price was exactly the circumstance that it thus opposed her to her stepmother more actively — if she was to back up her friends for holding out — than she had ever yet been opposed; though of course with the involved result of the fine chance given Mrs. Verver to ask her husband for explanations. Ah, from the moment she should be definitely CAUGHT in opposition there would be naturally no saying how much Charlotte's opportunities might multiply! What would become of her father, she hauntedly asked, if his wife, on the one side, should begin to press him to call his daughter to order, and the force of old habit — to put it only at that — should dispose him, not less effectively, to believe in this young person at any price? There she was, all round, imprisoned in the circle of the reasons it was impossible she should give — certainly give HIM. The house in the country was his house, and thereby was Charlotte's; it was her own and Amerigo's only so far as its proper master and mistress should profusely place it at their disposal. Maggie felt of course that she saw no limit to her father's profusion, but this couldn't be even at the best the case with Charlotte's, whom it would never be decent, when all was said, to reduce to fighting for her preferences. There were hours, truly, when the Princess saw herself as not unarmed for battle if battle might only take place without

spectators.

This last advantage for her, was, however, too sadly out of the question; her sole strength lay in her being able to see that if Charlotte wouldn't "want" the Assinghams it would be because that sentiment too would have motives and grounds. She had all the while command of one way of meeting any objection, any complaint, on his wife's part, reported to her by her father; it would be open to her to retort to his possible "What are your reasons, my dear?" by a lucidly-produced "What are hers, love, please? — isn't that what we had better know? Mayn't her reasons be a dislike, beautifully founded, of the presence, and thereby of the observation, of persons who perhaps know about her things it's inconvenient to her they should know?" That hideous card she might in mere logic play — being by this time, at her still swifter private pace, intimately familiar with all the fingered pasteboard in her pack. But she could play it only on the forbidden issue of sacrificing him; the issue so forbidden that it involved even a horror of finding out if he would really have consented to be sacrificed. What she must do she must do by keeping her hands off him; and nothing meanwhile, as we see, had less in common with that scruple than such a merciless manipulation of their yielding beneficiaries as her spirit so boldly revelled in. She saw herself, in this connexion, without detachment — saw others alone with intensity; otherwise she might have been struck, fairly have been amused, by her free assignment of the pachydermatous quality. If SHE could face the awkwardness of the persistence of her friends at Fawns in spite of Charlotte, she somehow looked to them for an inspiration of courage that would improve upon her own. They were in short not only themselves to find a plausibility and an audacity, but were somehow by the way to pick up these forms for her, Maggie, as well. And she felt indeed that she was giving them scant time longer when, one afternoon in Portland Place, she broke out with an irrelevance that was merely superficial.

"What awfulness, in heaven's name, is there between them? What do you believe, what do you KNOW?"

Oh, if she went by faces her visitor's sudden whiteness, at this, might have carried her far! Fanny Assingham turned pale for it, but there was something in such an appearance, in the look it put into the eyes, that renewed Maggie's conviction of what this companion had been expecting. She had been watching it come, come from afar, and now that it was there, after all, and the first convulsion over, they would doubtless soon find themselves in a more real relation. It was there because of the Sunday luncheon they had partaken of alone together; it was there, as strangely as one would, because of the bad weather, the cold perverse June rain, that was making the day wrong; it was there because it stood for the whole sum of the perplexities and duplicities among which our young woman felt herself lately to have picked her steps; it was there because Amerigo and Charlotte were again paying together alone a "week end" visit which it had been Maggie's plan infernally to promote — just to see if, this time, they really would; it was there because she had kept Fanny, on her side, from paying one she would manifestly have been glad to pay, and had made her come instead, stupidly, vacantly, boringly, to luncheon: all in the spirit of celebrating the fact that the Prince and Mrs. Verver had thus put it into her own power to describe them exactly as they were. It had abruptly occurred, in truth, that Maggie required the preliminary help of determining HOW they were; though, on the other hand, before her guest had answered her question everything in the hour and the place, everything in all the conditions, affected her as crying it out. Her guest's stare of ignorance, above all — that of itself at first cried it out. "'Between them?' What do you mean?"

"Anything there shouldn't be, there shouldn't have BEEN — all this time. Do you believe there is — or what's your idea?"

Fanny's idea was clearly, to begin with, that her young friend had taken her breath away; but she looked at her very straight and very hard. "Do you speak from a suspicion of your own?"

"I speak, at last, from a torment. Forgive me if it comes out. I've been thinking for months and months, and I've no one to turn to, no one to help me to make things out; no impression but my own, don't you see? to go by."

"You've been thinking for months and months?" Mrs. Assingham took it in. "But WHAT then, dear Maggie, have you been thinking?"

"Well, horrible things — like a little beast that I perhaps am. That there may be something — something wrong and dreadful, something they cover up."

The elder woman's colour had begun to come back; she was able, though with a visible effort, to face the question less amazedly. "You imagine, poor child, that the wretches are in love? Is that it?"

But Maggie for a minute only stared back at her. "Help me to find out WHAT I imagine. I don't know —

I've nothing but my perpetual anxiety. Have you any? — do you see what I mean? If you'll tell me truly, that at least, one way or the other, will do something for me."

Fanny's look had taken a peculiar gravity — a fulness with which it seemed to shine. "Is what it comes to that you're jealous of Charlotte?"

"Do you mean whether I hate her?" — and Maggie thought. "No; not on account of father."

"Ah," Mrs. Assingham returned, "that isn't what one would suppose. What I ask is if you're jealous on account of your husband."

"Well," said Maggie presently, "perhaps that may be all. If I'm unhappy I'm jealous; it must come to the same thing; and with you, at least, I'm not afraid of the word. If I'm jealous, don't you see? I'm tormented," she went on— "and all the more if I'm helpless. And if I'm both helpless AND tormented I stuff my pocket-handkerchief into my mouth, I keep it there, for the most part, night and day, so as not to be heard too indecently moaning. Only now, with you, at last, I can't keep it longer; I've pulled it out, and here I am fairly screaming at you. They're away," she wound up, "so they can't hear; and I'm, by a miracle of arrangement, not at luncheon with father at home. I live in the midst of miracles of arrangement, half of which I admit, are my own; I go about on tiptoe, I watch for every sound, I feel every breath, and yet I try all the while to seem as smooth as old satin dyed rose-colour. Have you ever thought of me," she asked, "as really feeling as I do?"

Her companion, conspicuously, required to be clear. "Jealous, unhappy, tormented — ? No," said Mrs. Assingham; "but at the same time — and though you may laugh at me for it! — I'm bound to confess that I've never been so awfully sure of what I may call knowing you. Here you are indeed, as you say — such a deep little person! I've never imagined your existence poisoned, and, since you wish to know if I consider that it need be, I've not the least difficulty in speaking on the spot. Nothing, decidedly, strikes me as more unnecessary."

For a minute after this they remained face to face; Maggie had sprung up while her friend sat enthroned, and, after moving to and fro in her intensity, now paused to receive the light she had invoked. It had accumulated, considerably, by this time, round Mrs. Assingham's ample presence, and it made, even to our young woman's own sense, a medium in which she could at last take a deeper breath. "I've affected you, these months — and these last weeks in especial — as quiet and natural and easy?"

But it was a question that took, not imperceptibly, some answering. "You've never affected me, from the first hour I beheld you, as anything but — in a way all your own — absolutely good and sweet and beautiful. In a way, as I say," Mrs. Assingham almost caressingly repeated, "just all your very own — nobody else's at all. I've never thought of you but as OUTSIDE of ugly things, so ignorant of any falsity or cruelty or vulgarity as never to have to be touched by them or to touch them. I've never mixed you up with them; there would have been time enough for that if they had seemed to be near you. But they haven't — if that's what you want to know."

"You've only believed me contented then because you've believed me stupid?"

Mrs. Assingham had a free smile, now, for the length of this stride, dissimulated though it might be in a graceful little frisk. "If I had believed you stupid I shouldn't have thought you interesting, and if I hadn't thought you interesting I shouldn't have noted whether I 'knew' you, as I've called it, or not. What I've always been conscious of is your having concealed about you somewhere no small amount of character; quite as much in fact," Fanny smiled, "as one could suppose a person of your size able to carry. The only thing was," she explained, "that thanks to your never calling one's attention to it, I hadn't made out much more about it, and should have been vague, above all, as to WHERE you carried it or kept it. Somewhere UNDER, I should simply have said — like that little silver cross you once showed me, blest by the Holy Father, that you always wear, out of sight, next your skin. That relic I've had a glimpse of" — with which she continued to invoke the privilege of humour. "But the precious little innermost, say this time little golden, personal nature of you — blest by a greater power, I think, even than the Pope — that you've never consentingly shown me. I'm not sure you've ever consentingly shown it to anyone. You've been in general too modest."

Maggie, trying to follow, almost achieved a little fold of her forehead. "I strike you as modest to-day — modest when I stand here and scream at you?"

"Oh, your screaming, I've granted you, is something new. I must fit it on somewhere. The question is, however," Mrs. Assingham further proceeded, "of what the deuce I can fit it on TO. Do you mean," she asked, "to the fact of our friends' being, from yesterday to to-morrow, at a place where they may more or less irresponsibly meet?" She spoke with the air of putting it as badly for them as possible. "Are you thinking of

their being there alone — of their having consented to be?" And then as she had waited without result for her companion to say: "But isn't it true that — after you had this time again, at the eleventh hour, said YOU wouldn't — they would really much rather not have gone?"

"Yes — they would certainly much rather not have gone. But I wanted them to go."

"Then, my dear child, what in the world is the matter?"

"I wanted to see if they WOULD. And they've had to," Maggie added. "It was the only thing."

Her friend appeared to wonder. "From the moment you and your father backed out?"

"Oh, I don't mean go for those people; I mean go for us. For father and me," Maggie went on. "Because now they know."

"They 'know'?" Fanny Assingham quavered.

"That I've been for some time past taking more notice. Notice of the queer things in our life."

Maggie saw her companion for an instant on the point of asking her what these queer things might be; but Mrs. Assingham had the next minute brushed by that ambiguous opening and taken, as she evidently felt, a better one. "And is it for that you did it? I mean gave up the visit."

"It's for that I did it. To leave them to themselves — as they less and less want, or at any rate less and less venture to appear to want, to be left. As they had for so long arranged things," the Princess went on, "you see they sometimes have to be." And then, as if baffled by the lucidity of this, Mrs. Assingham for a little said nothing: "Now do you think I'm modest?"

With time, however; Fanny could brilliantly think anything that would serve. "I think you're wrong. That, my dear, is my answer to your question. It demands assuredly the straightest I can make. I see no 'awfulness' — I suspect none. I'm deeply distressed," she added, "that you should do anything else." It drew again from Maggie a long look. "You've never even imagined anything?"

"Ah, God forbid! — for it's exactly as a woman of imagination that I speak. There's no moment of my life at which I'm not imagining something; and it's thanks to that, darling," Mrs. Assingham pursued, "that I figure the sincerity with which your husband, whom you see as viciously occupied with your stepmother, is interested, is tenderly interested, in his admirable, adorable wife." She paused a minute as to give her friend the full benefit of this — as to Maggie's measure of which, however, no sign came; and then, poor woman, haplessly, she crowned her effort.— "He wouldn't hurt a hair of your head."

It had produced in Maggie, at once, and apparently in the intended form of a smile, the most extraordinary expression. "Ah, there it is!"

But her guest had already gone on. "And I'm absolutely certain that Charlotte wouldn't either."

It kept the Princess, with her strange grimace, standing there. "No — Charlotte wouldn't either. That's how they've had again to go off together. They've been afraid not to — lest it should disturb me, aggravate me, somehow work upon me. As I insisted that they must, that we couldn't all fail — though father and Charlotte hadn't really accepted; as I did this they had to yield to the fear that their showing as afraid to move together would count for them as the greater danger: which would be the danger, you see, of my feeling myself wronged. Their least danger, they know, is in going on with all the things that I've seemed to accept and that I've given no indication, at any moment, of not accepting. Everything that has come up for them has come up, in an extraordinary manner, without my having by a sound or a sign given myself away — so that it's all as wonderful as you may conceive. They move at any rate among the dangers I speak of — between that of their doing too much and that of their not having any longer the confidence, or the nerve, or whatever you may call it, to do enough." Her tone, by this time, might have shown a strangeness to match her smile; which was still more marked as she wound up. "And that's how I make them do what I like!"

It had an effect on Mrs. Assingham, who rose with the deliberation that, from point to point, marked the widening of her grasp. "My dear child, you're amazing."

"Amazing — ?"

"You're terrible."

Maggie thoughtfully shook her head. "No; I'm not terrible, and you don't think me so. I do strike you as surprising, no doubt — but surprisingly mild. Because — don't you see? — I AM mild. I can bear anything."

"Oh, 'bear'!" Mrs. Assingham fluted.

"For love," said the Princess.

Fanny hesitated. "Of your father?"

"For love," Maggie repeated.

It kept her friend watching. “Of your husband?”

“For love,” Maggie said again.

It was, for the moment, as if the distinctness of this might have determined in her companion a choice between two or three highly different alternatives. Mrs. Assingham’s rejoinder, at all events — however much or however little it was a choice — was presently a triumph. “Speaking with this love of your own then, have you undertaken to convey to me that you believe your husband and your father’s wife to be in act and in fact lovers of each other?” And then as the Princess didn’t at first answer: “Do you call such an allegation as that ‘mild’?”

“Oh, I’m not pretending to be mild to you. But I’ve told you, and moreover you must have seen for yourself, how much so I’ve been to them.”

Mrs. Assingham, more brightly again, bridled. “Is that what you call it when you make them, for terror as you say, do as you like?”

“Ah, there wouldn’t be any terror for them if they had nothing to hide.”

Mrs. Assingham faced her — quite steady now. “Are you really conscious, love, of what you’re saying?”

“I’m saying that I’m bewildered and tormented, and that I’ve no one but you to speak to. I’ve thought, I’ve in fact been sure, that you’ve seen for yourself how much this is the case. It’s why I’ve believed you would meet me half way.”

“Half way to what? To denouncing,” Fanny asked, “two persons, friends of years, whom I’ve always immensely admired and liked, and against whom I haven’t the shadow of a charge to make?”

Maggie looked at her with wide eyes. “I had much rather you should denounce me than denounce them. Denounce me, denounce me,” she said, “if you can see your way.” It was exactly what she appeared to have argued out with herself. “If, conscientiously, you can denounce me; if, conscientiously, you can revile me; if, conscientiously, you can put me in my place for a low-minded little pig — !”

“Well?” said Mrs. Assingham, consideringly, as she paused for emphasis.

“I think I shall be saved.”

Her friend took it, for a minute, however, by carrying thoughtful eyes, eyes verily portentous, over her head. “You say you’ve no one to speak to, and you make a point of your having so disguised your feelings — not having, as you call it, given yourself away. Have you then never seen it not only as your right, but as your bounden duty, worked up to such a pitch, to speak to your husband?”

“I’ve spoken to him,” said Maggie.

Mrs. Assingham stared. “Ah, then it isn’t true that you’ve made no sign.”

Maggie had a silence. “I’ve made no trouble. I’ve made no scene. I’ve taken no stand. I’ve neither reproached nor accused him. You’ll say there’s a way in all that of being nasty enough.”

“Oh!” dropped from Fanny as if she couldn’t help it.

“But I don’t think — strangely enough — that he regards me as nasty. I think that at bottom — for that IS,” said the Princess, “the strangeness — he’s sorry for me. Yes, I think that, deep within, he pities me.”

Her companion wondered. “For the state you’ve let yourself get into?”

“For not being happy when I’ve so much to make me so.”

“You’ve everything,” said Mrs. Assingham with alacrity. Yet she remained for an instant embarrassed as to a further advance. “I don’t understand, however, how, if you’ve done nothing—”

An impatience from Maggie had checked her. “I’ve not done absolutely ‘nothing.’”

“But what then — ?”

“Well,” she went on after a minute, “he knows what I’ve done.”

It produced on Mrs. Assingham’s part, her whole tone and manner exquisitely aiding, a hush not less prolonged, and the very duration of which inevitably gave it something of the character of an equal recognition. “And what then has HE done?”

Maggie took again a minute. “He has been splendid.”

“‘Splendid’? Then what more do you want?”

“Ah, what you see!” said Maggie. “Not to be afraid.”

It made her guest again hang fire. “Not to be afraid really to speak?”

“Not to be afraid NOT to speak.”

Mrs. Assingham considered further. “You can’t even to Charlotte?” But as, at this, after a look at her, Maggie turned off with a movement of suppressed despair, she checked herself and might have been watching

her, for all the difficulty and the pity of it, vaguely moving to the window and the view of the hill street. It was almost as if she had had to give up, from failure of responsive wit in her friend — the last failure she had feared — the hope of the particular relief she had been working for. Mrs. Assingham resumed the next instant, however, in the very tone that seemed most to promise her she should have to give up nothing. “I see, I see; you would have in that case too many things to consider.” It brought the Princess round again, proving itself thus the note of comprehension she wished most to clutch at. “Don’t be afraid.”

Maggie took it where she stood — which she was soon able to signify. “Thank-you.”

It very properly encouraged her counsellor. “What your idea imputes is a criminal intrigue carried on, from day to day, amid perfect trust and sympathy, not only under your eyes, but under your father’s. That’s an idea it’s impossible for me for a. moment to entertain.”

“Ah, there you are then! It’s exactly what I wanted from you.”

“You’re welcome to it!” Mrs. Assingham breathed.

“You never HAVE entertained it?” Maggie pursued.

“Never for an instant,” said Fanny with her head very high.

Maggie took it again, yet again as wanting more. “Pardon my being so horrid. But by all you hold sacred?”

Mrs. Assingham faced her. “Ah, my dear, upon my positive word as an honest woman.”

“Thank-you then,” said the Princess.

So they remained a little; after which, “But do you believe it, love?” Fanny inquired.

“I believe YOU.”

“Well, as I’ve faith in THEM, it comes to the same thing.”

Maggie, at this last, appeared for a moment to think again; but she embraced the proposition. “The same thing.”

“Then you’re no longer unhappy?” her guest urged, coming more gaily toward her.

“I doubtless shan’t be a great while.”

But it was now Mrs. Assingham’s turn to want more. “I’ve convinced you it’s impossible?”

She had held out her arms, and Maggie, after a moment, meeting her, threw herself into them with a sound that had its oddity as a sign of relief. “Impossible, impossible,” she emphatically, more than emphatically, replied; yet the next minute she had burst into tears over the impossibility, and a few seconds later, pressing, clinging, sobbing, had even caused them to flow, audibly, sympathetically and perversely, from her friend.

XXXI

The understanding appeared to have come to be that the Colonel and his wife were to present themselves toward the middle of July for the "good long visit" at Fawns on which Maggie had obtained from her father that he should genially insist; as well as that the couple from Eaton Square should welcome there earlier in the month, and less than a week after their own arrival, the advent of the couple from Portland Place. "Oh, we shall give you time to breathe!" Fanny remarked, in reference to the general prospect, with a gaiety that announced itself as heedless of criticism, to each member of the party in turn; sustaining and bracing herself by her emphasis, pushed even to an amiable cynicism, of the confident view of these punctualities of the Assinghams. The ground she could best occupy, to her sense, was that of her being moved, as in this connexion she had always been moved, by the admitted grossness of her avidity, the way the hospitality of the Ververs met her convenience and ministered to her ease, destitute as the Colonel had kept her, from the first, of any rustic retreat, any leafy bower of her own, any fixed base for the stale season now at hand. She had explained at home, she had repeatedly reexplained, the terms of her dilemma, the real difficulty of her, or — as she now put it — of their position. When the pair could do nothing else, in Cadogan Place, they could still talk of marvellous little Maggie, and of the charm, the sinister charm, of their having to hold their breath to watch her; a topic the momentous midnight discussion at which we have been present was so far from having exhausted. It came up, irrepressibly, at all private hours; they had planted it there between them, and it grew, from day to day, in a manner to make their sense of responsibility almost yield to their sense of fascination. Mrs. Assingham declared at such moments that in the interest of this admirable young thing — to whom, she also declared, she had quite "come over" — she was ready to pass with all the world else, even with the Prince himself, the object, inconsequently, as well, of her continued, her explicitly shameless appreciation, for a vulgar, indelicate, pestilential woman, showing her true character in an abandoned old age. The Colonel's confessed attention had been enlisted, we have seen, as never yet, under pressure from his wife, by any guaranteed imbroglio; but this, she could assure him she perfectly knew, was not a bit because he was sorry for her, or touched by what she had let herself in for, but because, when once they had been opened, he couldn't keep his eyes from resting complacently, resting almost intelligently, on the Princess. If he was in love with HER now, however, so much the better; it would help them both not to wince at what they would have to do for her. Mrs. Assingham had come back to that, whenever he groaned or grunted; she had at no beguiled moment — since Maggie's little march WAS positively beguiling — let him lose sight of the grim necessity awaiting them. "We shall have, as I've again and again told you, to lie for her — to lie till we're black in the face."

"To lie 'for' her?" The Colonel often, at these hours, as from a vague vision of old chivalry in a new form, wandered into apparent lapses from lucidity.

"To lie TO her, up and down, and in and out — it comes to the same thing. It will consist just as much of lying to the others too: to the Prince about one's belief in HIM; to Charlotte about one's belief in HER; to Mr. Verver, dear sweet man, about one's belief in everyone. So we've work cut out — with the biggest lie, on top of all, being that we LIKE to be there for such a purpose. We hate it unspeakably — I'm more ready to be a coward before it, to let the whole thing, to let everyone, selfishly and pusillanimously slide, than before any social duty, any felt human call, that has ever forced me to be decent. I speak at least for myself. For you," she had added, "as I've given you so perfect an opportunity to fall in love with Maggie, you'll doubtless find your account in being so much nearer to her."

"And what do you make," the Colonel could, at this, always imperturbably enough ask, "of the account you yourself will find in being so much nearer to the Prince; of your confirmed, if not exasperated, infatuation with whom — to say nothing of my weak good-nature about it — you give such a pretty picture?"

To the picture in question she had been always, in fact, able contemplatively to return. "The difficulty of my enjoyment of that is, don't you see? that I'm making, in my loyalty to Maggie, a sad hash of his affection for me."

"You find means to call it then, this whitewashing of his crime, being 'loyal' to Maggie?"

"Oh, about that particular crime there is always much to say. It is always more interesting to us than any other crime; it has at least that for it. But of course I call everything I have in mind at all being loyal to Maggie. Being loyal to her is, more than anything else, helping her with her father — which is what she most

wants and needs."

The Colonel had had it before, but he could apparently never have too much of it. "Helping her 'with' him — ?"

"Helping her against him then. Against what we've already so fully talked of — its having to be recognised between them that he doubts. That's where my part is so plain — to see her through, to see her through to the end." Exaltation, for the moment, always lighted Mrs. Assingham's reference to this plainness; yet she at the same time seldom failed, the next instant, to qualify her view of it. "When I talk of my obligation as clear I mean that it's absolute; for just HOW, from day to day and through thick and thin, to keep the thing up is, I grant you, another matter. There's one way, luckily, nevertheless, in which I'm strong. I can perfectly count on her."

The Colonel seldom failed here, as from the insidious growth of an excitement, to wonder, to encourage. "Not to see you're lying?"

"To stick to me fast, whatever she sees. If I stick to her — that is to my own poor struggling way, under providence, of watching over them ALL — she'll stand by me to the death. She won't give me away. For, you know, she easily can."

This, regularly, was the most lurid turn of their road; but Bob Assingham, with each journey, met it as for the first time. "Easily?"

"She can utterly dishonour me with her father. She can let him know that I was aware, at the time of his marriage — as I had been aware at the time of her own — of the relations that had pre-existed between his wife and her husband."

"And how can she do so if, up to this minute, by your own statement, she is herself in ignorance of your knowledge?"

It was a question that Mrs. Assingham had ever, for dealing with, a manner to which repeated practice had given almost a grand effect; very much as if she was invited by it to say that about this, exactly, she proposed to do her best lying. But she said, and with full lucidity, something quite other: it could give itself a little the air, still, of a triumph over his coarseness. "By acting, immediately with the blind resentment with which, in her place, ninety-nine women out of a hundred would act; and by so making Mr. Verver, in turn, act with the same natural passion, the passion of ninety-nine men out of a hundred. They've only to agree about me," the poor lady said; "they've only to feel at one over it, feel bitterly practised upon, cheated and injured; they've only to denounce me to each other as false and infamous, for me to be quite irretrievably dished. Of course it's I who have been, and who continue to be, cheated — cheated by the Prince and Charlotte; but they're not obliged to give me the benefit of that, or to give either of us the benefit of anything. They'll be within their rights to lump us all together as a false, cruel, conspiring crew, and, if they can find the right facts to support them, get rid of us root and branch."

This, on each occasion, put the matter so at the worst that repetition even scarce controlled the hot flush with which she was compelled to see the parts of the whole history, all its ugly consistency and its temporary gloss, hang together. She enjoyed, invariably, the sense of making her danger present, of making it real, to her husband, and of his almost turning pale, when their eyes met, at this possibility of their compromised state and their shared discredit. The beauty was that, as under a touch of one of the ivory notes at the left of the keyboard, he sounded out with the short sharpness of the dear fond stupid uneasy man. "Conspiring — so far as YOU were concerned — to what end?"

"Why, to the obvious end of getting the Prince a wife — at Maggie's expense. And then to that of getting Charlotte a husband at Mr. Verver's."

"Of rendering friendly services, yes — which have produced, as it turns out, complications. But from the moment you didn't do it FOR the complications, why shouldn't you have rendered them?"

It was extraordinary for her, always, in this connexion, how, with time given him, he fell to speaking better for her than she could, in the presence of her clear-cut image of the "worst," speak for herself. Troubled as she was she thus never wholly failed of her amusement by the way. "Oh, isn't what I may have meddled 'for' — so far as it can be proved I did meddle — open to interpretation; by which I mean to Mr. Verver's and Maggie's? Mayn't they see my motive, in the light of that appreciation, as the wish to be decidedly more friendly to the others than to the victimised father and daughter?" She positively liked to keep it up. "Mayn't they see my motive as the determination to serve the Prince, in any case, and at any price, first; to 'place' him comfortably; in other words to find him his fill of money? Mayn't it have all the air for them of a really

equivocal, sinister bargain between us — something quite unholy and louche?"

It produced in the poor Colonel, infallibly, the echo. "'Louche,' love — ?"

"Why, haven't you said as much yourself? — haven't you put your finger on that awful possibility?"

She had a way now, with his felicities, that made him enjoy being reminded of them. "In speaking of your having always had such a 'mash' — ?"

"Such a mash, precisely, for the man I was to help to put so splendidly at his ease. A motherly mash an impartial look at it would show it only as likely to have been — but we're not talking, of course, about impartial looks. We're talking of good innocent people deeply worked upon by a horrid discovery, and going much further, in their view of the lurid, as such people almost always do, than those who have been wider awake, all round, from the first. What I was to have got from my friend, in such a view, in exchange for what I had been able to do for him — well, that would have been an equivalent, of a kind best known to myself, for me shrewdly to consider." And she easily lost herself, each time, in the anxious satisfaction of filling out the picture. "It would have been seen, it would have been heard of, before, the case of the woman a man doesn't want, or of whom he's tired, or for whom he has no use but SUCH uses, and who is capable, in her infatuation, in her passion, of promoting his interests with other women rather than lose sight of him, lose touch of him, cease to have to do with him at all. Cela s'est vu, my dear; and stranger things still — as I needn't tell YOU! Very good then," she wound up; "there is a perfectly possible conception of the behaviour of your sweet wife; since, as I say, there's no imagination so lively, once it's started, as that of really agitated lambs. Lions are nothing to them, for lions are sophisticated, are blases, are brought up, from the first, to prowling and mauling. It does give us, you'll admit, something to think about. My relief is luckily, however, in what I finally do think."

He was well enough aware, by this time, of what she finally did think; but he was not without a sense, again, also for his amusement by the way. It would have made him, for a spectator of these passages between the pair, resemble not a little the artless child who hears his favourite story told for the twentieth time and enjoys it exactly because he knows what is next to happen. "What of course will pull them up, if they turn out to have less imagination than you assume, is the profit you can have found in furthering Mrs. Verver's marriage. You weren't at least in love with Charlotte."

"Oh," Mrs. Assingham, at this, always brought out, "my hand in that is easily accounted for by my desire to be agreeable to HIM."

"To Mr. Verver?"

"To the Prince — by preventing her in that way from taking, as he was in danger of seeing her do, some husband with whom he wouldn't be able to open, to keep open, so large an account as with his father-in-law. I've brought her near him, kept her within his reach, as she could never have remained either as a single woman or as the wife of a different man."

"Kept her, on that sweet construction, to be his mistress?"

"Kept her, on that sweet construction, to be his mistress." She brought it out grandly — it had always so, for her own ear as well as, visibly, for her husband's, its effect. "The facilities in the case, thanks to the particular conditions, being so quite ideal."

"Down even to the facility of your minding everything so little — from your own point of view — as to have supplied him with the enjoyment of TWO beautiful women."

"Down even to THAT — to the monstrosity of my folly. But not," Mrs. Assingham added, "'two' of anything. One beautiful woman — and one beautiful fortune. That's what a creature of pure virtue exposes herself to when she suffers her pure virtue, suffers her sympathy, her disinterestedness, her exquisite sense for the lives of others, to carry her too far. Voila."

"I see. It's the way the Ververs have you."

"It's the way the Ververs 'have' me. It's in other words the way they would be able to make such a show to each other of having me — if Maggie weren't so divine."

"She lets you off?" He never failed to insist on all this to the very end; which was how he had become so versed in what she finally thought.

"She lets me off. So that now, horrified and contrite at what I've done, I may work to help her out. And Mr. Verver," she was fond of adding, "lets me off too."

"Then you do believe he knows?"

It determined in her always, there, with a significant pause, a deep immersion in her thought. "I believe he

would let me off if he did know — so that I might work to help HIM out. Or rather, really," she went on, "that I might work to help Maggie. That would be his motive, that would be his condition, in forgiving me; just as hers, for me, in fact, her motive and her condition, are my acting to spare her father. But it's with Maggie only that I'm directly concerned; nothing, ever — not a breath, not a look, I'll guarantee — shall I have, whatever happens, from Mr. Verver himself. So it is, therefore, that I shall probably, by the closest possible shave, escape the penalty of my crimes."

"You mean being held responsible."

"I mean being held responsible. My advantage will be that Maggie's such a trump."

"Such a trump that, as you say, she'll stick to you."

"Stick to me, on our understanding — stick to me. For our understanding's signed and sealed." And to brood over it again was ever, for Mrs. Assingham, to break out again with exaltation. "It's a grand, high compact. She has solemnly promised."

"But in words — ?"

"Oh yes, in words enough — since it's a matter of words. To keep up HER lie so long as I keep up mine."

"And what do you call 'her' lie?"

"Why, the pretence that she believes me. Believes they're innocent."

"She positively believes then they're guilty? She has arrived at that, she's really content with it, in the absence of proof?" It was here, each time, that Fanny Assingham most faltered; but always at last to get the matter, for her own sense, and with a long sigh, sufficiently straight. "It isn't a question of belief or of proof, absent or present; it's inevitably, with her, a question of natural perception, of insurmountable feeling. She irresistibly knows that there's something between them. But she hasn't 'arrived' at it, as you say, at all; that's exactly what she hasn't done, what she so steadily and intensely refuses to do. She stands off and off, so as not to arrive; she keeps out to sea and away from the rocks, and what she most wants of me is to keep at a safe distance with her — as I, for my own skin, only ask not to come nearer." After which, invariably, she let him have it all. "So far from wanting proof — which she must get, in a manner, by my siding with her — she wants DISproof, as against herself, and has appealed to me, so extraordinarily, to side against her. It's really magnificent, when you come to think of it, the spirit of her appeal. If I'll but cover them up brazenly enough, the others, so as to show, round and about them, as happy as a bird, she on her side will do what she can. If I'll keep them quiet, in a word, it will enable her to gain time — time as against any idea of her father's — and so, somehow, come out. If I'll take care of Charlotte, in particular, she'll take care of the Prince; and it's beautiful and wonderful, really pathetic and exquisite, to see what she feels that time may do for her."

"Ah, but what does she call, poor little thing, 'time'?"

"Well, this summer at Fawns, to begin with. She can live as yet, of course, but from hand to mouth; but she has worked it out for herself, I think, that the very danger of Fawns, superficially looked at, may practically amount to a greater protection. THERE the lovers — if they ARE lovers! — will have to mind. They'll feel it for themselves, unless things are too utterly far gone with them."

"And things are NOT too utterly far gone with them?"

She had inevitably, poor woman, her hesitation for this, but she put down her answer as, for the purchase of some absolutely indispensable article, she would have put down her last shilling. "No."

It made him always grin at her. "Is THAT a lie?"

"Do you think you're worth lying to? If it weren't the truth, for me," she added, "I wouldn't have accepted for Fawns. I CAN, I believe, keep the wretches quiet."

"But how — at the worst?"

"Oh, 'the worst' — don't talk about the worst! I can keep them quiet at the best, I seem to feel, simply by our being there. It will work, from week to week, of itself. You'll see."

He was willing enough to see, but he desired to provide — ! "Yet if it doesn't work?"

"Ah, that's talking about the worst!"

Well, it might be; but what were they doing, from morning to night, at this crisis, but talk? "Who'll keep the others?"

"The others — ?"

"Who'll keep THEM quiet? If your couple have had a life together, they can't have had it completely without witnesses, without the help of persons, however few, who must have some knowledge, some idea about them. They've had to meet, secretly, protectedly, they've had to arrange; for if they haven't met, and

haven't arranged, and haven't thereby, in some quarter or other, had to give themselves away, why are we piling it up so? Therefore if there's evidence, up and down London—"

"There must be people in possession of it? Ah, it isn't all," she always remembered, "up and down London. Some of it must connect them — I mean," she musingly added, "it naturally WOULD — with other places; with who knows what strange adventures, opportunities, dissimulations? But whatever there may have been, it will also all have been buried on the spot. Oh, they've known HOW — too beautifully! But nothing, all the same, is likely to find its way to Maggie of itself."

"Because every one who may have anything to tell, you hold, will have been so squared?" And then inveterately, before she could say — he enjoyed so much coming to this: "What will have squared Lady Castledean?"

"The consciousness" — she had never lost her promptness— "of having no stones to throw at any one else's windows. She has enough to do to guard her own glass. That was what she was doing," Fanny said, "that last morning at Matcham when all of us went off and she kept the Prince and Charlotte over. She helped them simply that she might herself be helped — if it wasn't perhaps, rather, with her ridiculous Mr. Blint, that HE might be. They put in together, therefore, of course, that day; they got it clear — and quite under her eyes; inasmuch as they didn't become traceable again, as we know, till late in the evening." On this historic circumstance Mrs. Assingham was always ready afresh to brood; but she was no less ready, after her brooding, devoutly to add "Only we know nothing whatever else — for which all our stars be thanked!"

The Colonel's gratitude was apt to be less marked. "What did they do for themselves, all the same, from the moment they got that free hand to the moment (long after dinner-time, haven't you told me?) of their turning up at their respective homes?"

"Well, it's none of your business!"

"I don't speak of it as mine, but it's only too much theirs. People are always traceable, in England, when tracings are required. Something, sooner or later, happens; somebody, sooner or later, breaks the holy calm. Murder will out."

"Murder will — but this isn't murder. Quite the contrary perhaps! I verily believe," she had her moments of adding, "that, for the amusement of the row, you would prefer an explosion."

This, however, was a remark he seldom noticed; he wound up, for the most part, after a long, contemplative smoke, with a transition from which no exposed futility in it had succeeded in weaning him. "What I can't for my life make out is your idea of the old boy."

"Charlotte's too inconceivably funny husband? I HAVE no idea."

"I beg your pardon — you've just shown it. You never speak of him but as too inconceivably funny."

"Well, he is," she always confessed. "That is he may be, for all I know, too inconceivably great. But that's not an idea. It represents only my weak necessity of feeling that he's beyond me — which isn't an idea either. You see he MAY be stupid too."

"Precisely — there you are."

"Yet on the other hand," she always went on, "he MAY be sublime: sublimer even than Maggie herself. He may in fact have already been. But we shall never know." With which her tone betrayed perhaps a shade of soreness for the single exemption she didn't yearningly welcome. "THAT I can see."

"Oh, I say — !" It came to affect the Colonel himself with a sense of privation.

"I'm not sure, even, that Charlotte will."

"Oh, my dear, what Charlotte doesn't know — !"

But she brooded and brooded. "I'm not sure even that the Prince will." It seemed privation, in short, for them all. "They'll be mystified, confounded, tormented. But they won't know — and all their possible putting their heads together won't make them. That," said Fanny Assingham, "will be their punishment." And she ended, ever, when she had come so far, at the same pitch. "It will probably also — if I get off with so little — be mine."

"And what," her husband liked to ask, "will be mine?"

"Nothing — you're not worthy of any. One's punishment is in what one feels, and what will make ours effective is that we SHALL feel." She was splendid with her "ours"; she flared up with this prophecy. "It will be Maggie herself who will mete it out."

"Maggie — ?"

"SHE'LL know — about her father; everything. Everything," she repeated. On the vision of which, each

time, Mrs. Assingham, as with the presentiment of an odd despair, turned away from it. “But she’ll never tell us.”

XXXII

If Maggie had not so firmly made up her mind never to say, either to her good friend or to any one else, more than she meant about her father, she might have found herself betrayed into some such overflow during the week spent in London with her husband after the others had adjourned to Fawns for the summer. This was because of the odd element of the unnatural imparted to the so simple fact of their brief separation by the assumptions resident in their course of life hitherto. She was used, herself, certainly, by this time, to dealing with odd elements; but she dropped, instantly, even from such peace as she had patched up, when it was a question of feeling that her unpenetrated parent might be alone with them. She thought of him as alone with them when she thought of him as alone with Charlotte — and this, strangely enough, even while fixing her sense to the full on his wife's power of preserving, quite of enhancing, every felicitous appearance. Charlotte had done that — under immeasurably fewer difficulties indeed — during the numerous months of their hymeneal absence from England, the period prior to that wonderful reunion of the couples, in the interest of the larger play of all the virtues of each, which was now bearing, for Mrs. Verver's stepdaughter at least, such remarkable fruit. It was the present so much briefer interval, in a situation, possibly in a relation, so changed — it was the new terms of her problem that would tax Charlotte's art. The Princess could pull herself up, repeatedly, by remembering that the real "relation" between her father and his wife was a thing that she knew nothing about and that, in strictness, was none of her business; but she none the less failed to keep quiet, as she would have called it, before the projected image of their ostensibly happy isolation. Nothing could have had less of the quality of quietude than a certain queer wish that fitfully flickered up in her, a wish that usurped, perversely, the place of a much more natural one. If Charlotte, while she was about it, could only have been WORSE! — that idea Maggie fell to invoking instead of the idea that she might desirably have been better. For, exceedingly odd as it was to feel in such ways, she believed she mightn't have worried so much if she didn't somehow make her stepmother out, under the beautiful trees and among the dear old gardens, as lavish of fifty kinds of confidence and twenty kinds, at least, of gentleness. Gentleness and confidence were certainly the right thing, as from a charming woman to her husband, but the fine tissue of reassurance woven by this lady's hands and flung over her companion as a light, muffling veil, formed precisely a wrought transparency through which she felt her father's eyes continually rest on herself. The reach of his gaze came to her straighter from a distance; it showed him as still more conscious, down there alone, of the suspected, the felt elaboration of the process of their not alarming or hurting him. She had herself now, for weeks and weeks, and all unwinkingly, traced the extension of this pious effort; but her perfect success in giving no sign — she did herself THAT credit — would have been an achievement quite wasted if Mrs. Verver should make with him those mistakes of proportion, one set of them too abruptly, too incoherently designed to correct another set, that she had made with his daughter. However, if she HAD been worse, poor woman, who should say that her husband would, to a certainty, have been better?

One groped noiselessly among such questions, and it was actually not even definite for the Princess that her own Amerigo, left alone with her in town, had arrived at the golden mean of non-precautionary gallantry which would tend, by his calculation, to brush private criticism from its last perching-place. The truth was, in this connection, that she had different sorts of terrors, and there were hours when it came to her that these days were a prolonged repetition of that night-drive, of weeks before, from the other house to their own, when he had tried to charm her, by his sovereign personal power, into some collapse that would commit her to a repudiation of consistency. She was never alone with him, it was to be said, without her having sooner or later to ask herself what had already become of her consistency; yet, at the same time, so long as she breathed no charge, she kept hold of a remnant of appearance that could save her from attack. Attack, real attack, from him, as he would conduct it was what she above all dreaded; she was so far from sure that under that experience she mightn't drop into some depth of weakness, mightn't show him some shortest way with her that he would know how to use again. Therefore, since she had given him, as yet, no moment's pretext for pretending to her that she had either lost faith or suffered by a feather's weight in happiness, she left him, it was easy to reason, with an immense advantage for all waiting and all tension. She wished him, for the present, to "make up" to her for nothing. Who could say to what making-up might lead, into what consenting or pretending or destroying blindness it might plunge her? She loved him too helplessly, still, to dare to open the door, by an inch, to his treating her as if either of them had wronged the other. Something or somebody —

and who, at this, which of them all? — would inevitably, would in the gust of momentary selfishness, be sacrificed to that; whereas what she intelligently needed was to know where she was going. Knowledge, knowledge, was a fascination as well as a fear; and a part, precisely, of the strangeness of this juncture was the way her apprehension that he would break out to her with some merely general profession was mixed with her dire need to forgive him, to reassure him, to respond to him, on no ground that she didn't fully measure. To do these things it must be clear to her what they were FOR; but to act in that light was, by the same effect, to learn, horribly, what the other things had been. He might tell her only what he wanted, only what would work upon her by the beauty of his appeal; and the result of the direct appeal of ANY beauty in him would be her helpless submission to his terms. All her temporary safety, her hand-to-mouth success, accordingly, was in his neither perceiving nor divining this, thanks to such means as she could take to prevent him; take, literally from hour to hour, during these days of more unbroken exposure. From hour to hour she fairly expected some sign of his having decided on a jump. "Ah yes, it HAS been as you think; I've strayed away, I've fancied myself free, given myself in other quantities, with larger generosities, because I thought you were different — different from what I now see. But it was only, only, because I didn't know — and you must admit that you gave me scarce reason enough. Reason enough, I mean, to keep clear of my mistake; to which I confess, for which I'll do exquisite penance, which you can help me now, I too beautifully feel, to get completely over."

That was what, while she watched herself, she potentially heard him bring out; and while she carried to an end another day, another sequence and yet another of their hours together, without his producing it, she felt herself occupied with him beyond even the intensity of surrender. She was keeping her head, for a reason, for a cause; and the labour of this detachment, with the labour of her keeping the pitch of it down, held them together in the steel hoop of an intimacy compared with which artless passion would have been but a beating of the air. Her greatest danger, or at least her greatest motive for care, was the obsession of the thought that, if he actually did suspect, the fruit of his attention to her couldn't help being a sense of the growth of her importance. Taking the measure, with him, as she had taken it with her father, of the prescribed reach of her hypocrisy, she saw how it would have to stretch even to her seeking to prove that she was NOT, all the same, important. A single touch from him — oh, she should know it in case of its coming! — any brush of his hand, of his lips, of his voice, inspired by recognition of her probable interest as distinct from pity for her virtual gloom, would hand her over to him bound hand and foot. Therefore to be free, to be free to act, other than abjectly, for her father, she must conceal from him the validity that, like a microscopic insect pushing a grain of sand, she was taking on even for herself. She could keep it up with a change in sight, but she couldn't keep it up forever; so that, really, one extraordinary effect of their week of untempered confrontation, which bristled with new marks, was to make her reach out, in thought, to their customary companions and calculate the kind of relief that rejoining them would bring. She was learning, almost from minute to minute, to be a mistress of shades since, always, when there were possibilities enough of intimacy, there were also, by that fact, in intercourse, possibilities of iridescence; but she was working against an adversary who was a master of shades too, and on whom, if she didn't look out, she should presently have imposed a consciousness of the nature of their struggle. To feel him in fact, to think of his feeling himself, her adversary in things of this fineness — to see him at all, in short, brave a name that would represent him as in opposition — was already to be nearly reduced to a visible smothering of her cry of alarm. Should he guess they were having, in their so occult manner, a HIGH fight, and that it was she, all the while, in her supposed stupidity, who had made it high and was keeping it high — in the event of his doing this before they could leave town she should verily be lost.

The possible respite for her at Fawns would come from the fact that observation, in him, there, would inevitably find some of its directness diverted. This would be the case if only because the remarkable strain of her father's placidity might be thought of as likely to claim some larger part of his attention. Besides which there would be always Charlotte herself to draw him off. Charlotte would help him again, doubtless, to study anything, right or left, that might be symptomatic; but Maggie could see that this very fact might perhaps contribute, in its degree, to protect the secret of her own fermentation. It is not even incredible that she may have discovered the gleam of a comfort that was to broaden in the conceivable effect on the Prince's spirit, on his nerves, on his finer irritability, of some of the very airs and aspects, the light graces themselves, of Mrs. Verver's too perfect competence. What it would most come to, after all, she said to herself, was a renewal for him of the privilege of watching that lady watch her. Very well, then: with the elements after all so mixed in

him, how long would he go on enjoying mere spectatorship of that act? For she had by this time made up her mind that in Charlotte's company he deferred to Charlotte's easier art of mounting guard. Wouldn't he get tired — to put it only at that — of seeing her always on the rampart, erect and elegant, with her lace-flounced parasol now folded and now shouldered, march to and fro against a gold-coloured east or west? Maggie had gone far, truly for a view of the question of this particular reaction, and she was not incapable of pulling herself up with the rebuke that she counted her chickens before they were hatched. How sure she should have to be of so many things before she might thus find a weariness in Amerigo's expression and a logic in his weariness!

One of her dissimulated arts for meeting their tension, meanwhile, was to interweave Mrs. Assingham as plausibly as possible with the undulations of their surface, to bring it about that she should join them, of an afternoon, when they drove together or if they went to look at things — looking at things being almost as much a feature of their life as if they were bazaar-opening royalties. Then there were such combinations, later in the day, as her attendance on them, and the Colonel's as well, for such whimsical matters as visits to the opera no matter who was singing, and sudden outbreaks of curiosity about the British drama. The good couple from Cadogan Place could always unprotestingly dine with them and "go on" afterwards to such publicities as the Princess cultivated the boldness of now perversely preferring. It may be said of her that, during these passages, she plucked her sensations by the way, detached, nervously, the small wild blossoms of her dim forest, so that she could smile over them at least with the spacious appearance, for her companions, for her husband above all, of bravely, of altogether frivolously, going a-maying. She had her intense, her smothered excitements, some of which were almost inspirations; she had in particular the extravagant, positively at moments the amused, sense of using her friend to the topmost notch, accompanied with the high luxury of not having to explain. Never, no never, should she have to explain to Fanny Assingham again — who, poor woman, on her own side, would be charged, it might be forever, with that privilege of the higher ingenuity. She put it all off on Fanny, and the dear thing herself might henceforth appraise the quantity. More and more magnificent now in her blameless egoism, Maggie asked no questions of her, and thus only signified the greatness of the opportunity she gave her. She didn't care for what devotions, what dinners of their own the Assinghams might have been "booked"; that was a detail, and she could think without wincing of the ruptures and rearrangements to which her service condemned them. It all fell in beautifully, moreover; so that, as hard, at this time, in spite of her fever, as a little pointed diamond, the Princess showed something of the glitter of consciously possessing the constructive, the creative hand. She had but to have the fancy of presenting herself, of presenting her husband, in a certain high and convenient manner, to make it natural they should go about with their gentleman and their lady. To what else but this, exactly, had Charlotte, during so many weeks of the earlier season, worked her up? — herself assuming and discharging, so far as might be, the character and office of one of those revolving subordinate presences that float in the wake of greatness.

The precedent was therefore established and the group normally constituted. Mrs. Assingham, meanwhile, at table, on the stairs, in the carriage or the opera-box, might — with her constant overflow of expression, for that matter, and its singularly resident character where men in especial were concerned — look across at Amerigo in whatever sense she liked: it was not of that Maggie proposed to be afraid. She might warn him, she might rebuke him, she might reassure him, she might — if it were impossible not to — absolutely make love to him; even this was open to her, as a matter simply between them, if it would help her to answer for the impeccability he had guaranteed. And Maggie desired in fact only to strike her as acknowledging the efficacy of her aid when she mentioned to her one evening a small project for the morrow, privately entertained — the idea, irresistible, intense, of going to pay, at the Museum, a visit to Mr. Crichton. Mr. Crichton, as Mrs. Assingham could easily remember, was the most accomplished and obliging of public functionaries, whom every one knew and who knew every one — who had from the first, in particular, lent himself freely, and for the love of art and history, to becoming one of the steadier lights of Mr. Verver's adventurous path. The custodian of one of the richest departments of the great national collection of precious things, he could feel for the sincere private collector and urge him on his way even when condemned to be present at his capture of trophies sacrificed by the country to parliamentary thrift. He carried his amiability to the point of saying that, since London, under pettifogging views, had to miss, from time to time, its rarest opportunities, he was almost consoled to see such lost causes invariably wander at last, one by one, with the tormenting tinkle of their silver bells, into the wondrous, the already famous fold beyond the Mississippi. There was a charm in his "almosts" that was not to be resisted, especially after Mr. Verver and Maggie had grown sure — or almost,

again — of enjoying the monopoly of them; and on this basis of envy changed to sympathy by the more familiar view of the father and the daughter, Mr. Crichton had at both houses, though especially in Eaton Square, learned to fill out the responsive and suggestive character. It was at his invitation, Fanny well recalled, that Maggie, one day, long before, and under her own attendance precisely, had, for the glory of the name she bore, paid a visit to one of the ampler shrines of the supreme exhibitory temple, an alcove of shelves charged with the gold-and-brown, gold-and-ivory, of old Italian bindings and consecrated to the records of the Prince's race. It had been an impression that penetrated, that remained; yet Maggie had sighed, ever so prettily, at its having to be so superficial. She was to go back some day, to dive deeper, to linger and taste; in spite of which, however, Mrs. Assingham could not recollect perceiving that the visit had been repeated. This second occasion had given way, for a long time, in her happy life, to other occasions — all testifying, in their degree, to the quality of her husband's blood, its rich mixture and its many remarkable references; after which, no doubt, the charming piety involved had grown, on still further grounds, bewildered and faint.

It now appeared, none the less, that some renewed conversation with Mr. Crichton had breathed on the faintness revivingly, and Maggie mentioned her purpose as a conception of her very own, to the success of which she designed to devote her morning. Visits of gracious ladies, under his protection, lighted up rosily, for this perhaps most flower-loving and honey-sipping member of the great Bloomsbury hive, its packed passages and cells; and though not sworn of the province toward which his friend had found herself, according to her appeal to him, yearning again, nothing was easier for him than to put her in relation with the presiding urbanities. So it had been settled, Maggie said to Mrs. Assingham, and she was to dispense with Amerigo's company. Fanny was to remember later on that she had at first taken this last fact for one of the finer notes of her young woman's detachment, imagined she must be going alone because of the shade of irony that, in these ambiguous days, her husband's personal presence might be felt to confer, practically, on any tribute to his transmitted significance. Then as, the next moment, she felt it clear that so much plotted freedom was virtually a refinement of reflection, an impulse to commemorate afresh whatever might still survive of pride and hope, her sense of ambiguity happily fell and she congratulated her companion on having anything so exquisite to do and on being so exquisitely in the humour to do it. After the occasion had come and gone she was confirmed in her optimism; she made out, in the evening, that the hour spent among the projected lights, the annals and illustrations, the parchments and portraits, the emblazoned volumes and the murmured commentary, had been for the Princess enlarging and inspiring. Maggie had said to her some days before, very sweetly but very firmly, "Invite us to dine, please, for Friday, and have any one you like or you can — it doesn't in the least matter whom;" and the pair in Cadogan Place had bent to this mandate with a docility not in the least ruffled by all that it took for granted.

It provided for an evening — this had been Maggie's view; and she lived up to her view, in her friend's eyes, by treating the occasion, more or less explicitly, as new and strange. The good Assinghams had feasted in fact at the two other boards on a scale so disproportionate to the scant solicitations of their own that it was easy to make a joke of seeing how they fed at home, how they met, themselves, the question of giving to eat. Maggie dined with them, in short, and arrived at making her husband appear to dine, much in the manner of a pair of young sovereigns who have, in the frolic humour of the golden years of reigns, proposed themselves to a pair of faithfully-serving subjects. She showed an interest in their arrangements, an inquiring tenderness almost for their economies; so that her hostess not unnaturally, as they might have said, put it all down — the tone and the freedom of which she set the example — to the effect wrought in her afresh by one of the lessons learned, in the morning, at the altar of the past. Hadn't she picked it up, from an anecdote or two offered again to her attention, that there were, for princesses of such a line, more ways than one of being a heroine? Maggie's way to-night was to surprise them all, truly, by the extravagance of her affability. She was doubtless not positively boisterous; yet, though Mrs. Assingham, as a bland critic, had never doubted her being graceful, she had never seen her put so much of it into being what might have been called assertive. It was all a tune to which Fanny's heart could privately palpitate: her guest was happy, happy as a consequence of something that had occurred, but she was making the Prince not lose a ripple of her laugh, though not perhaps always enabling him to find it absolutely not foolish. Foolish, in public, beyond a certain point, he was scarce the man to brook his wife's being thought to be; so that there hovered before their friend the possibility of some subsequent scene between them, in the carriage or at home, of slightly sarcastic inquiry, of promptly invited explanation; a scene that, according as Maggie should play her part in it, might or might not

precipitate developments. What made these appearances practically thrilling, meanwhile, was this mystery — a mystery, it was clear, to Amerigo himself — of the incident or the influence that had so peculiarly determined them.

The lady of Cadogan Place was to read deeper, however, within three days, and the page was turned for her on the eve of her young confidant's leaving London. The awaited migration to Fawns was to take place on the morrow, and it was known meanwhile to Mrs. Assingham that their party of four were to dine that night, at the American Embassy, with another and a larger party; so that the elder woman had a sense of surprise on receiving from the younger, under date of six o'clock, a telegram requesting her immediate attendance. "Please come to me at once; dress early, if necessary, so that we shall have time: the carriage, ordered for us, will take you back first." Mrs. Assingham, on quick deliberation, dressed, though not perhaps with full lucidity, and by seven o'clock was in Portland Place, where her friend, "upstairs" and described to her on her arrival as herself engaged in dressing, instantly received her. She knew on the spot, poor Fanny, as she was afterwards to declare to the Colonel, that her feared crisis had popped up as at the touch of a spring, that her impossible hour was before her. Her impossible hour was the hour of its coming out that she had known of old so much more than she had ever said; and she had often put it to herself, in apprehension, she tried to think even in preparation, that she should recognise the approach of her doom by a consciousness akin to that of the blowing open of a window on some night of the highest wind and the lowest thermometer. It would be all in vain to have crouched so long by the fire; the glass would have been smashed, the icy air would fill the place. If the air in Maggie's room then, on her going up, was not, as yet, quite the polar blast she had expected, it was distinctly, none the less, such an atmosphere as they had not hitherto breathed together. The Princess, she perceived, was completely dressed — that business was over; it added indeed to the effect of her importantly awaiting the assistance she had summoned, of her showing a deck cleared, so to speak, for action. Her maid had already left her, and she presented herself, in the large, clear room, where everything was admirable, but where nothing was out of place, as, for the first time in her life rather "bedizened." Was it that she had put on too many things, overcharged herself with jewels, wore in particular more of them than usual, and bigger ones, in her hair? — a question her visitor presently answered by attributing this appearance largely to the bright red spot, red as some monstrous ruby, that burned in either of her cheeks. These two items of her aspect had, promptly enough, their own light for Mrs. Assingham, who made out by it that nothing more pathetic could be imagined than the refuge and disguise her agitation had instinctively asked of the arts of dress, multiplied to extravagance, almost to incoherence. She had had, visibly, her idea — that of not betraying herself by inattentions into which she had never yet fallen, and she stood there circled about and furnished forth, as always, in a manner that testified to her perfect little personal processes. It had ever been her sign that she was, for all occasions, FOUND ready, without loose ends or exposed accessories or unremoved superfluities; a suggestion of the swept and garnished, in her whole splendid, yet thereby more or less encumbered and embroidered setting, that reflected her small still passion for order and symmetry, for objects with their backs to the walls, and spoke even of some probable reference, in her American blood, to dusting and polishing New England grandmothers. If her apartment was "princely," in the clearness of the lingering day, she looked as if she had been carried there prepared, all attired and decorated, like some holy image in a procession, and left, precisely, to show what wonder she could work under pressure. Her friend felt — how could she not? — as the truly pious priest might feel when confronted, behind the altar, before the festa, with his miraculous Madonna. Such an occasion would be grave, in general, with all the gravity of what he might look for. But the gravity to-night would be of the rarest; what he might look for would depend so on what he could give.

XXXIII

"Something very strange has happened, and I think you ought to know it."

Maggie spoke this indeed without extravagance, yet with the effect of making her guest measure anew the force of her appeal. It was their definite understanding: whatever Fanny knew Fanny's faith would provide for. And she knew, accordingly, at the end of five minutes, what the extraordinary, in the late occurrence, had consisted of, and how it had all come of Maggie's achieved hour, under Mr. Crichton's protection, at the Museum. He had desired, Mr. Crichton, with characteristic kindness, after the wonderful show, after offered luncheon at his incorporated lodge hard by, to see her safely home; especially on his noting, in attending her to the great steps, that she had dismissed her carriage; which she had done, really, just for the harmless amusement of taking her way alone. She had known she should find herself, as the consequence of such an hour, in a sort of exalted state, under the influence of which a walk through the London streets would be exactly what would suit her best; an independent ramble, impressed, excited, contented, with nothing to mind and nobody to talk to, and shop-windows in plenty to look at if she liked: a low taste, of the essence, it was to be supposed, of her nature, that she had of late, for so many reasons, been unable to gratify. She had taken her leave, with her thanks — she knew her way quite enough; it being also sufficiently the case that she had even a shy hope of not going too straight. To wander a little wild was what would truly amuse her; so that, keeping clear of Oxford Street and cultivating an impression as of parts she didn't know, she had ended with what she had more or less had been fancying, an encounter with three or four shops — an old bookseller's, an old printmonger's, a couple of places with dim antiquities in the window — that were not as so many of the other shops, those in Sloane Street, say; a hollow parade which had long since ceased to beguile. There had remained with her moreover an allusion of Charlotte's, of some months before — seed dropped into her imagination in the form of a casual speech about there being in Bloomsbury such "funny little fascinating" places and even sometimes such unexpected finds. There could perhaps have been no stronger mark than this sense of well-nigh romantic opportunity — no livelier sign of the impression made on her, and always so long retained, so watchfully nursed, by any observation of Charlotte's, however lightly thrown off. And then she had felt, somehow, more at her ease than for months and months before; she didn't know why, but her time at the Museum, oddly, had done it; it was as if she hadn't come into so many noble and beautiful associations, nor secured them also for her boy, secured them even for her father, only to see them turn to vanity and doubt, turn possibly to something still worse. "I believed in him again as much as ever, and I felt how I believed in him," she said with bright, fixed eyes; "I felt it in the streets as I walked along, and it was as if that helped me and lifted me up, my being off by myself there, not having, for the moment, to wonder and watch; having, on the contrary, almost nothing on my mind."

It was so much as if everything would come out right that she had fallen to thinking of her father's birthday, had given herself this as a reason for trying what she could pick up for it. They would keep it at Fawns, where they had kept it before — since it would be the twenty-first of the month; and she mightn't have another chance of making sure of something to offer him. There was always the impossibility, of course, of finding him anything, the least bit "good," that he wouldn't already, long ago, in his rummagings, have seen himself — and only not to think a quarter good enough; this, however, was an old story, and one could not have had any fun with him but for his sweet theory that the individual gift, the friendship's offering, was, by a rigorous law of nature, a foredoomed aberration, and that the more it was so the more it showed, and the more one cherished it for showing, how friendly it had been. The infirmity of art was the candour of affection, the grossness of pedigree the refinement of sympathy; the ugliest objects, in fact, as a general thing, were the bravest, the tenderest mementos, and, as such, figured in glass cases apart, worthy doubtless of the home, but not worthy of the temple — dedicated to the grimacing, not to the clear-faced, gods. She herself, naturally, through the past years, had come to be much represented in those receptacles; against the thick, locked panes of which she still liked to flatten her nose, finding in its place, each time, everything she had on successive anniversaries tried to believe he might pretend, at her suggestion, to be put off with, or at least think curious. She was now ready to try it again: they had always, with his pleasure in her pretence and her pleasure in his, with the funny betrayal of the sacrifice to domestic manners on either side, played the game so happily. To this end, on her way home, she had loitered everywhere; quite too deludedly among the old books and the old prints, which had yielded nothing to her purpose, but with a strange inconsequence in one of the other shops,

that of a small antiquarian, a queer little foreign man, who had shown her a number of things, shown her finally something that, struck with it as rather a rarity and thinking it would, compared to some of her ventures, quite superlatively do, she had bought — bought really, when it came to that, for a price. "It appears now it won't do at all," said Maggie, "something has happened since that puts it quite out of the question. I had only my day of satisfaction in it, but I feel, at the same time, as I keep it here before me, that I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

She had talked, from the first of her friend's entrances coherently enough, even with a small quaver that overstated her calm; but she held her breath every few seconds, as if for deliberation and to prove she didn't pant — all of which marked for Fanny the depth of her commotion: her reference to her thought about her father, about her chance to pick up something that might divert him, her mention, in fine, of his fortitude under presents, having meanwhile, naturally, it should be said, much less an amplitude of insistence on the speaker's lips than a power to produce on the part of the listener herself the prompt response and full comprehension of memory and sympathy, of old amused observation. The picture was filled out by the latter's fond fancy. But Maggie was at any rate under arms; she knew what she was doing and had already her plan — a plan for making, for allowing, as yet, "no difference"; in accordance with which she would still dine out, and not with red eyes, nor convulsed features, nor neglected items of appearance, nor anything that would raise a question. Yet there was some knowledge that, exactly to this support of her not breaking down, she desired, she required, possession of; and, with the sinister rise and fall of lightning unaccompanied by thunder, it played before Mrs. Assingham's eyes that she herself should have, at whatever risk or whatever cost, to supply her with the stuff of her need. All our friend's instinct was to hold off from this till she should see what the ground would bear; she would take no step nearer unless INTELLIGIBLY to meet her, and, awkward though it might be to hover there only pale and distorted, with mere imbecilities of vagueness, there was a quality of bald help in the fact of not as yet guessing what such an ominous start could lead to. She caught, however, after a second's thought, at the Princess's allusion to her lost reassurance.

"You mean you were so at your ease on Monday — the night you dined with us?"

"I was very happy then," said Maggie.

"Yes — we thought you so gay and so brilliant." Fanny felt it feeble, but she went on. "We were so glad you were happy."

Maggie stood a moment, at first only looking at her. "You thought me all right, eh?"

"Surely, dearest; we thought you all right."

"Well, I daresay it was natural; but in point of fact I never was more wrong in my life. For, all the while, if you please, this was brewing."

Mrs. Assingham indulged, as nearly as possible to luxury, her vagueness. "'This' — ?"

"THAT!" replied the Princess, whose eyes, her companion now saw, had turned to an object on the chimney-piece of the room, of which, among so many precious objects — the Ververs, wherever they might be, always revelled peculiarly in matchless old mantel ornaments — her visitor had not taken heed.

"Do you mean the gilt cup?"

"I mean the gilt cup."

The piece now recognised by Fanny as new to her own vision was a capacious bowl, of old-looking, rather strikingly yellow gold, mounted, by a short stem, on an ample foot, which held a central position above the fire-place, where, to allow it the better to show, a clearance had been made of other objects, notably of the Louis-Seize clock that accompanied the candelabra. This latter trophy ticked at present on the marble slab of a commode that exactly matched it in splendour and style. Mrs. Assingham took it, the bowl, as a fine thing; but the question was obviously not of its intrinsic value, and she kept off from it, admiring it at a distance. "But what has that to do — ?"

"It has everything. You'll see." With which again, however, for the moment, Maggie attached to her strange wide eyes. "He knew her before — before I had ever seen him."

"'He' knew — ?" But Fanny, while she cast about her for the links she missed, could only echo it.

"Amerigo knew Charlotte — more than I ever dreamed."

Fanny felt then it was stare for stare. "But surely you always knew they had met."

"I didn't understand. I knew too little. Don't you see what I mean?" the Princess asked.

Mrs. Assingham wondered, during these instants, how much she even now knew; it had taken a minute to perceive how gently she was speaking. With that perception of its being no challenge of wrath, no heat of the

deceived soul, but only a free exposure of the completeness of past ignorance, inviting derision even if it must, the elder woman felt, first, a strange, barely credible relief: she drew in, as if it had been the warm summer scent of a flower, the sweet certainty of not meeting, any way she should turn, any consequence of judgment. She shouldn't be judged — save by herself; which was her own wretched business. The next moment, however, at all events, she blushed, within, for her immediate cowardice: she had thought of herself, thought of "getting off," before so much as thinking — that is of pitifully seeing — that she was in presence of an appeal that was ALL an appeal, that utterly accepted its necessity. "In a general way, dear child, yes. But not — a — in connexion with what you've been telling me."

"They were intimate, you see. Intimate," said the Princess.

Fanny continued to face her, taking from her excited eyes this history, so dim and faint for all her anxious emphasis, of the far-away other time. "There's always the question of what one considers — !"

"What one considers intimate? Well, I know what I consider intimate now. Too intimate," said Maggie, "to let me know anything about it."

It was quiet — yes; but not too quiet for Fanny Assingham's capacity to wince. "Only compatible with letting ME, you mean?" She had asked it after a pause, but turning again to the new ornament of the chimney and wondering, even while she took relief from it, at this gap in her experience. "But here are things, my dear, of which my ignorance is perfect."

"They went about together — they're known to have done it. And I don't mean only before — I mean after."

"After?" said Fanny Assingham.

"Before we were married — yes; but after we were engaged."

"Ah, I've known nothing about that!" And she said it with a braver assurance — clutching, with comfort, at something that was apparently new to her.

"That bowl," Maggie went on, "is, so strangely — too strangely, almost, to believe at this time of day — the proof. They were together all the while — up to the very eve of our marriage. Don't you remember how just before that she came back, so unexpectedly, from America?"

The question had for Mrs. Assingham — and whether all consciously or not — the oddest pathos of simplicity. "Oh yes, dear, of course I remember how she came back from America — and how she stayed with US, and what view one had of it."

Maggie's eyes still, all the time, pressed and penetrated; so that, during a moment, just here, she might have given the little flare, have made the little pounce, of asking what then "one's" view had been. To the small flash of this eruption Fanny stood, for her minute, wittingly exposed; but she saw it as quickly cease to threaten — quite saw the Princess, even though in all her pain, refuse, in the interest of their strange and exalted bargain, to take advantage of the opportunity for planting the stab of reproach, the opportunity thus coming all of itself. She saw her — or she believed she saw her — look at her chance for straight denunciation, look at it and then pass it by; and she felt herself, with this fact, hushed well-nigh to awe at the lucid higher intention that no distress could confound and that no discovery — since it was, however obscurely, a case of "discovery" — could make less needful. These seconds were brief — they rapidly passed; but they lasted long enough to renew our friend's sense of her own extraordinary undertaking, the function again imposed on her, the answerability again drilled into her, by this intensity of intimation. She was reminded of the terms on which she was let off — her quantity of release having made its sufficient show in that recall of her relation to Charlotte's old reappearance; and deep within the whole impression glowed — ah, so inspiringly when it came to that! her steady view, clear from the first, of the beauty of her companion's motive. It was like a fresh sacrifice for a larger conquest "Only see me through now, do it in the face of this and in spite of it, and I leave you a hand of which the freedom isn't to be said!" The aggravation of fear — or call it, apparently, of knowledge — had jumped straight into its place as an aggravation above all for her father; the effect of this being but to quicken to passion her reasons for making his protectedness, or in other words the forms of his ignorance, still the law of her attitude and the key to her solution. She kept as tight hold of these reasons and these forms, in her confirmed horror, as the rider of a plunging horse grasps his seat with his knees; and she might absolutely have been putting it to her guest that she believed she could stay on if they should only "meet" nothing more. Though ignorant still of what she had definitely met Fanny yearned, within, over her spirit; and so, no word about it said, passed, through mere pitying eyes, a vow to walk ahead and, at crossroads, with a lantern for the darkness and wavings away for unadvised traffic, look out for alarms.

There was accordingly no wait in Maggie's reply. "They spent together hours — spent at least a morning — the certainty of which has come back to me now, but that I didn't dream of it at the time. That cup there has turned witness — by the most wonderful of chances. That's why, since it has been here, I've stood it out for my husband to see; put it where it would meet him, almost immediately, if he should come into the room. I've wanted it to meet him," she went on, "and I've wanted him to meet it, and to be myself present at the meeting. But that hasn't taken place as yet; often as he has lately been in the way of coming to see me here — yes, in particular lately — he hasn't showed to-day." It was with her managed quietness, more and more, that she talked — an achieved coherence that helped her, evidently, to hear and to watch herself; there was support, and thereby an awful harmony, but which meant a further guidance, in the facts she could add together. "It's quite as if he had an instinct — something that has warned him off or made him uneasy. He doesn't quite know, naturally, what has happened, but guesses, with his beautiful cleverness, that something has, and isn't in a hurry to be confronted with it. So, in his vague fear, he keeps off."

"But being meanwhile in the house — ?"

"I've no idea — not having seen him to-day, by exception, since before luncheon. He spoke to me then," the Princess freely explained, "of a ballot, of great importance, at a club — for somebody, some personal friend, I think, who's coming up and is supposed to be in danger. To make an effort for him he thought he had better lunch there. You see the efforts he can make" — for which Maggie found a smile that went to her friend's heart. "He's in so many ways the kindest of men. But it was hours ago."

Mrs. Assingham thought. "The more danger then of his coming in and finding me here. I don't know, you see, what you now consider that you've ascertained; nor anything of the connexion with it of that object that you declare so damning." Her eyes rested on this odd acquisition and then quitted it, went back to it and again turned from it: it was inscrutable in its rather stupid elegance, and yet, from the moment one had thus appraised it, vivid and definite in its domination of the scene. Fanny could no more overlook it now than she could have overlooked a lighted Christmas-tree; but nervously and all in vain she dipped into her mind for some floating reminiscence of it. At the same time that this attempt left her blank she understood a good deal, she even not a little shared the Prince's mystic apprehension. The golden bowl put on, under consideration, a sturdy, a conscious perversity; as a "document," somehow, it was ugly, though it might have a decorative grace. "His finding me here in presence of it might be more flagrantly disagreeable — for all of us — than you intend or than would necessarily help us. And I must take time, truly, to understand what it means."

"You're safe, as far as that goes," Maggie returned; "you may take it from me that he won't come in; and that I shall only find him below, waiting for me, when I go down to the carriage."

Fanny Assingham took it from her, took it and more. "We're to sit together at the Ambassador's then — or at least you two are — with this new complication thrust up before you, all unexplained; and to look at each other with faces that pretend, for the ghastly hour, not to be seeing it?"

Maggie looked at HER with a face that might have been the one she was preparing. "'Unexplained,' my dear? Quite the contrary — explained: fully, intensely, admirably explained, with nothing really to add. My own love" — she kept it up— "I don't want anything more. I've plenty to go upon and to do with, as it is."

Fanny Assingham stood there in her comparative darkness, with her links, verily, still missing; but the most acceptable effect of this was, singularly, as yet, a cold fear of getting nearer the fact. "But when you come home — ? I mean he'll come up with you again. Won't he see it then?"

On which Maggie gave her, after an instant's visible thought, the strangest of slow headshakes. "I don't know. Perhaps he'll never see it — if it only stands there waiting for him. He may never again," said the Princess, "come into this room."

Fanny more deeply wondered, "Never again? Oh — !"

"Yes, it may be. How do I know? With THIS!" she quietly went on. She had not looked again at the incriminating piece, but there was a marvel to her friend in the way the little word representing it seemed to express and include for her the whole of her situation. "Then you intend not to speak to him — ?"

Maggie waited. "To 'speak' — ?"

"Well, about your having it and about what you consider that it represents."

"Oh, I don't know that I shall speak — if he doesn't. But his keeping away from me because of that — what will that be but to speak? He can't say or do more. It won't be for me to speak," Maggie added in a different tone, one of the tones that had already so penetrated her guest. "It will be for me to listen."

Mrs. Assingham turned it over. "Then it all depends on that object that you regard, for your reasons, as

evidence?"

"I think I may say that *I* depend on it. I can't," said Maggie, "treat it as nothing now."

Mrs. Assingham, at this, went closer to the cup on the chimney — quite liking to feel that she did so, moreover, without going closer to her companion's vision. She looked at the precious thing — if precious it was — found herself in fact eyeing it as if, by her dim solicitation, to draw its secret from it rather than suffer the imposition of Maggie's knowledge. It was brave and rich and firm, with its bold deep hollow; and, without this queer torment about it, would, thanks to her love of plenty of yellow, figure to her as an enviable ornament, a possession really desirable. She didn't touch it, but if after a minute she turned away from it the reason was, rather oddly and suddenly, in her fear of doing so. "Then it all depends on the bowl? I mean your future does? For that's what it comes to, I judge."

"What it comes to," Maggie presently returned, "is what that thing has put me, so almost miraculously, in the way of learning: how far they had originally gone together. If there was so much between them before, there can't — with all the other appearances — not be a great deal more now." And she went on and on; she steadily made her points. "If such things were already then between them they make all the difference for possible doubt of what may have been between them since. If there had been nothing before there might be explanations. But it makes to-day too much to explain. I mean to explain away," she said.

Fanny Assingham was there to explain away — of this she was duly conscious; for that at least had been true up to now. In the light, however, of Maggie's demonstration the quantity, even without her taking as yet a more exact measure, might well seem larger than ever. Besides which, with or without exactness, the effect of each successive minute in the place was to put her more in presence of what Maggie herself saw. Maggie herself saw the truth, and that was really, while they remained there together, enough for Mrs. Assingham's relation to it. There was a force in the Princess's mere manner about it that made the detail of what she knew a matter of minor importance. Fanny had in fact something like a momentary shame over her own need of asking for this detail. "I don't pretend to repudiate," she said after a little, "my own impressions of the different times I suppose you speak of; any more," she added, "than I can forget what difficulties and, as it constantly seemed to me, what dangers, every course of action — whatever I should decide upon — made for me. I tried, I tried hard, to act for the best. And, you know," she next pursued, while, at the sound of her own statement, a slow courage and even a faint warmth of conviction came back to her— "and, you know, I believe it's what I shall turn out to have done."

This produced a minute during which their interchange, though quickened and deepened, was that of silence only, and the long, charged look; all of which found virtual consecration when Maggie at last spoke. "I'm sure you tried to act for the best."

It kept Fanny Assingham again a minute in silence. "I never thought, dearest, you weren't an angel."

Not, however, that this alone was much help! "It was up to the very eve, you see," the Princess went on— "up to within two or three days of our marriage. That, THAT, you know — !" And she broke down for strangely smiling.

"Yes, as I say, it was while she was with me. But I didn't know it. That is," said Fanny Assingham, "I didn't know of anything in particular." It sounded weak — that she felt; but she had really her point to make. "What I mean is that I don't know, for knowledge, now, anything I didn't then. That's how I am." She still, however, floundered. "I mean it's how I WAS."

"But don't they, how you were and how you are," Maggie asked, "come practically to the same thing?" The elder woman's words had struck her own ear as in the tone, now mistimed, of their recent, but all too factitious understanding, arrived at in hours when, as there was nothing susceptible of proof, there was nothing definitely to disprove. The situation had changed by — well, by whatever there was, by the outbreak of the definite; and this could keep Maggie at least firm. She was firm enough as she pursued. "It was ON the whole thing that Amerigo married me." With which her eyes had their turn again at her damnatory piece. "And it was on that — it was on that!" But they came back to her visitor. "And it was on it all that father married HER."

Her visitor took it as might be. "They both married — ah, that you must believe! — with the highest intentions."

"Father did certainly!" And then, at the renewal of this consciousness, it all rolled over her. "Ah, to thrust such things on us, to do them here between us and with us, day after day, and in return, in return — ! To do it to HIM — to him, to him!"

Fanny hesitated. “You mean it’s for him you most suffer?” And then as the Princess, after a look, but turned away, moving about the room — which made the question somehow seem a blunder— “I ask,” she continued, “because I think everything, everything we now speak of, may be for him, really may be MADE for him, quite as if it hadn’t been.”

But Maggie had, the next moment faced about as if without hearing her. “Father did it for ME — did it all and only for me.”

Mrs. Assingham, with a certain promptness, threw up her head; but she faltered again before she spoke. “Well — !”

It was only an intended word, but Maggie showed after an instant that it had reached her. “Do you mean that that’s the reason, that that’s A reason — ?”

Fanny at first, however, feeling the response in this, didn’t say all she meant; she said for the moment something else instead. “He did it for you — largely at least for you. And it was for you that I did, in my smaller, interested way — well, what I could do. For I could do something,” she continued; “I thought I saw your interest as he himself saw it. And I thought I saw Charlotte’s. I believed in her.”

“And *I* believed in her,” said Maggie.

Mrs. Assingham waited again; but she presently pushed on. “She believed then in herself.”

“Ah?” Maggie murmured.

Something exquisite, faintly eager, in the prompt simplicity of it, supported her friend further. “And the Prince believed. His belief was real. Just as he believed in himself.”

Maggie spent a minute in taking it from her. “He believed in himself?”

“Just as I too believed in him. For I absolutely did, Maggie.” To which Fanny then added: “And I believe in him yet. I mean,” she subjoined— “well, I mean I DO.”

Maggie again took it from her; after which she was again, restlessly, set afloat. Then when this had come to an end: “And do you believe in Charlotte yet?”

Mrs. Assingham had a demur that she felt she could now afford. “We’ll talk of Charlotte some other day. They both, at any rate, thought themselves safe at the time.”

“Then why did they keep from me everything I might have known?”

Her friend bent upon her the mildest eyes. “Why did I myself keep it from you?”

“Oh, you weren’t, for honour, obliged.”

“Dearest Maggie,” the poor woman broke out on this, “you ARE divine!”

“They pretended to love me,” the Princess went on. “And they pretended to love HIM.”

“And pray what was there that I didn’t pretend?”

“Not, at any rate, to care for me as you cared for Amerigo and for Charlotte. They were much more interesting — it was perfectly natural. How couldn’t you like Amerigo?” Maggie continued.

Mrs. Assingham gave it up. “How couldn’t I, how couldn’t I?” Then, with a fine freedom, she went all her way. “How CAN’T I, how can’t I?”

It fixed afresh Maggie’s wide eyes on her. “I see — I see. Well, it’s beautiful for you to be able to. And of course,” she added, “you wanted to help Charlotte.”

“Yes” — Fanny considered it— “I wanted to help Charlotte. But I wanted also, you see, to help you — by not digging up a past that I believed, with so much on top of it, solidly buried. I wanted, as I still want,” she richly declared, “to help every one.”

It set Maggie once more in movement — movement which, however, spent itself again with a quick emphasis. “Then it’s a good deal my fault — if everything really began so well?”

Fanny Assingham met it as she could. “You’ve been only too perfect. You’ve thought only too much.”

But the Princess had already caught at the words. “Yes — I’ve thought only too much!” Yet she appeared to continue, for the minute, full of that fault. She had it in fact, by this prompted thought, all before her. “Of him, dear man, of HIM — !”

Her friend, able to take in thus directly her vision of her father, watched her with a new suspense. THAT way might safety lie — it was like a wider chink of light. “He believed — with a beauty! — in Charlotte.”

“Yes, and it was I who had made him believe. I didn’t mean to, at the time, so much; for I had no idea then of what was coming. But I did it, I did it!” the Princess declared.

“With a beauty — ah, with a beauty, you too!” Mrs. Assingham insisted.

Maggie, however, was seeing for herself — it was another matter, “The thing was that he made her think it

would be so possible."

Fanny again hesitated. "The Prince made her think — ?"

Maggie stared — she had meant her father. But her vision seemed to spread. "They both made her think. She wouldn't have thought without them."

"Yet Amerigo's good faith," Mrs. Assingham insisted, "was perfect. And there was nothing, all the more," she added, "against your father's."

The remark, however, kept Maggie for a moment still. "Nothing perhaps but his knowing that she knew."

"'Knew'?"

"That he was doing it, so much, for me. To what extent," she suddenly asked of her friend, "do you think he was aware that she knew?"

"Ah, who can say what passes between people in such a relation? The only thing one can be sure of is that he was generous." And Mrs. Assingham conclusively smiled. "He doubtless knew as much as was right for himself."

"As much, that is, as was right for her."

"Yes then — as was right for her. The point is," Fanny declared, "that, whatever his knowledge, it made, all the way it went, for his good faith."

Maggie continued to gaze, and her friend now fairly waited on her successive movements. "Isn't the point, very considerably, that his good faith must have been his faith in her taking almost as much interest in me as he himself took?"

Fanny Assingham thought. "He recognised, he adopted, your long friendship. But he founded on it no selfishness."

"No," said Maggie with still deeper consideration: "he counted her selfishness out almost as he counted his own."

"So you may say."

"Very well," Maggie went on; "if he had none of his own, he invited her, may have expected her, on her side, to have as little. And she may only since have found that out."

Mrs. Assingham looked blank. "Since — ?"

"And he may have become aware," Maggie pursued, "that she has found it out. That she has taken the measure, since their marriage," she explained, "of how much he had asked of her — more, say, than she had understood at the time. He may have made out at last how such a demand was, in the long run, to affect her."

"He may have done many things," Mrs. Assingham responded; "but there's one thing he certainly won't have done. He'll never have shown that he expected of her a quarter as much as she must have understood he was to give."

"I've often wondered," Maggie mused, "what Charlotte really understood. But it's one of the things she has never told me."

"Then as it's one of the things she has never told me either, we shall probably never know it; and we may regard it as none of our business. There are many things," said Mrs. Assingham, "that we shall never know."

Maggie took it in with a long reflection. "Never."

"But there are others," her friend went on, "that stare us in the face and that — under whatever difficulty you may feel you labour — may now be enough for us. Your father has been extraordinary."

It had been as if Maggie were feeling her way; but she rallied to this with a rush. "Extraordinary."

"Magnificent," said Fanny Assingham.

Her companion held tight to it. "Magnificent."

"Then he'll do for himself whatever there may be to do. What he undertook for you he'll do to the end. He didn't undertake it to break down; in what — quiet, patient, exquisite as he is — did he ever break down? He had never in his life proposed to himself to have failed, and he won't have done it on this occasion."

"Ah, this occasion!" — and Maggie's wail showed her, of a sudden, thrown back on it. "Am I in the least sure that, with everything, he even knows what it is? And yet am I in the least sure he doesn't?"

"If he doesn't then, so much the better. Leave him alone."

"Do you mean give him up?"

"Leave HER," Fanny Assingham went on. "Leave her TO him."

Maggie looked at her darkly. "Do you mean leave him to HER? After this?"

"After everything. Aren't they, for that matter, intimately together now?"

"'Intimately' — ? How do I know?"

But Fanny kept it up. "Aren't you and your husband — in spite of everything?"

Maggie's eyes still further, if possible, dilated. "It remains to be seen!"

"If you're not then, where's your faith?"

"In my husband — ?"

Mrs. Assingham but for an instant hesitated. "In your father. It all comes back to that. Rest on it."

"On his ignorance?"

Fanny met it again. "On whatever he may offer you. TAKE that."

"Take it — ?" Maggie stared.

Mrs. Assingham held up her head. "And be grateful." On which, for a minute, she let the Princess face her. "Do you see?"

"I see," said Maggie at last.

"Then there you are." But Maggie had turned away, moving to the window, as if still to keep something in her face from sight. She stood there with her eyes on the street while Mrs. Assingham's reverted to that complicating object on the chimney as to which her condition, so oddly even to herself, was that both of recurrent wonder and recurrent protest. She went over it, looked at it afresh and yielded now to her impulse to feel it in her hands. She laid them on it, lifting it up, and was surprised, thus, with the weight of it — she had seldom handled so much massive gold. That effect itself somehow prompted her to further freedom and presently to saying: "I don't believe in this, you know."

It brought Maggie round to her. "Don't believe in it? You will when I tell you."

"Ah, tell me nothing! I won't have it," said Mrs. Assingham. She kept the cup in her hand, held it there in a manner that gave Maggie's attention to her, she saw the next moment, a quality of excited suspense. This suggested to her, oddly, that she had, with the liberty she was taking, an air of intention, and the impression betrayed by her companion's eyes grew more distinct in a word of warning. "It's of value, but its value's impaired, I've learned, by a crack."

"A crack? — in the gold — ?"

"It isn't gold." With which, somewhat strangely, Maggie smiled.

"That's the point."

"What is it then?"

"It's glass — and cracked, under the gilt, as I say, at that."

"Glass? — of this weight?"

"Well," said Maggie, "it's crystal — and was once, I suppose, precious. But what," she then asked, "do you mean to do with it?"

She had come away from her window, one of the three by which the wide room, enjoying an advantageous "back," commanded the western sky and caught a glimpse of the evening flush; while Mrs. Assingham, possessed of the bowl, and possessed too of this indication of a flaw, approached another for the benefit of the slowly-fading light. Here, thumbing the singular piece, weighing it, turning it over, and growing suddenly more conscious, above all, of an irresistible impulse, she presently spoke again. "A crack? Then your whole idea has a crack."

Maggie, by this time at some distance from her, waited a moment. "If you mean by my idea the knowledge that has come to me THAT—"

But Fanny, with decision, had already taken her up. "There's only one knowledge that concerns us — one fact with which we can have anything to do."

"Which one, then?"

"The fact that your husband has never, never, never — !" But the very gravity of this statement, while she raised her eyes to her friend across the room, made her for an instant hang fire.

"Well, never what?"

"Never been half so interested in you as now. But don't you, my dear, really feel it?"

Maggie considered. "Oh, I think what I've told you helps me to feel it. His having to-day given up even his forms; his keeping away from me; his not having come." And she shook her head as against all easy glosses. "It is because of that, you know."

"Well then, if it's because of this — !" And Fanny Assingham, who had been casting about her and whose inspiration decidedly had come, raised the cup in her two hands, raised it positively above her head, and from

under it, solemnly, smiled at the Princess as a signal of intention. So for an instant, full of her thought and of her act, she held the precious vessel, and then, with due note taken of the margin of the polished floor, bare, fine and hard in the embrasure of her window, she dashed it boldly to the ground, where she had the thrill of seeing it, with the violence of the crash, lie shattered. She had flushed with the force of her effort, as Maggie had flushed with wonder at the sight, and this high reflection in their faces was all that passed between them for a minute more. After which, "Whatever you meant by it — and I don't want to know NOW — has ceased to exist," Mrs. Assingham said.

"And what in the world, my dear, did you mean by it?" — that sound, as at the touch of a spring, rang out as the first effect of Fanny's speech. It broke upon the two women's absorption with a sharpness almost equal to the smash of the crystal, for the door of the room had been opened by the Prince without their taking heed. He had apparently had time, moreover, to catch the conclusion of Fanny's act; his eyes attached themselves, through the large space allowing just there, as happened, a free view, to the shining fragments at this lady's feet. His question had been addressed to his wife, but he moved his eyes immediately afterwards to those of her visitor, whose own then held them in a manner of which neither party had been capable, doubtless, for mute penetration, since the hour spent by him in Cadogan Place on the eve of his marriage and the afternoon of Charlotte's reappearance. Something now again became possible for these communicants, under the intensity of their pressure, something that took up that tale and that might have been a redemption of pledges then exchanged. This rapid play of suppressed appeal and disguised response lasted indeed long enough for more results than one — long enough for Mrs. Assingham to measure the feat of quick self-recovery, possibly therefore of recognition still more immediate, accompanying Amerigo's vision and estimate of the evidence with which she had been — so admirably, she felt as she looked at him — inspired to deal. She looked at him and looked at him — there were so many things she wanted, on the spot, to say. But Maggie was looking too — and was moreover looking at them both; so that these things, for the elder woman, quickly enough reduced themselves to one. She met his question — not too late, since, in their silence, it had remained in the air. Gathering herself to go, leaving the golden bowl split into three pieces on the ground, she simply referred him to his wife. She should see them later, they would all meet soon again; and meanwhile, as to what Maggie had meant — she said, in her turn, from the door — why, Maggie herself was doubtless by this time ready to tell him.

XXXIV

Left with her husband, Maggie, however, for the time, said nothing; she only felt, on the spot, a strong, sharp wish not to see his face again till he should have had a minute to arrange it. She had seen it enough for her temporary clearness and her next movement — seen it as it showed during the stare of surprise that followed his entrance. Then it was that she knew how hugely expert she had been made, for judging it quickly, by that vision of it, indelibly registered for reference, that had flashed a light into her troubled soul the night of his late return from Matcham. The expression worn by it at that juncture, for however few instants, had given her a sense of its possibilities, one of the most relevant of which might have been playing up for her, before the consummation of Fanny Assingham's retreat, just long enough to be recognised. What she had recognised in it was HIS recognition, the result of his having been forced, by the flush of their visitor's attitude and the unextinguished report of her words, to take account of the flagrant signs of the accident, of the incident, on which he had unexpectedly dropped. He had, not unnaturally, failed to see this occurrence represented by the three fragments of an object apparently valuable which lay there on the floor and which, even across the width of the room, his kept interval, reminded him, unmistakably though confusedly, of something known, some other unforgotten image. That was a mere shock, that was a pain — as if Fanny's violence had been a violence redoubled and acting beyond its intention, a violence calling up the hot blood as a blow across the mouth might have called it. Maggie knew as she turned away from him that she didn't want his pain; what she wanted was her own simple certainty — not the red mark of conviction flaming there in his beauty. If she could have gone on with bandaged eyes she would have liked that best; if it were a question of saying what she now, apparently, should have to, and of taking from him what he would say, any blindness that might wrap it would be the nearest approach to a boon.

She went in silence to where her friend — never, in intention, visibly, so much her friend as at that moment — had braced herself to so amazing an energy, and there, under Amerigo's eyes, she picked up the shining pieces. Bedizened and jewelled, in her rustling finery, she paid, with humility of attitude, this prompt tribute to order — only to find, however, that she could carry but two of the fragments at once. She brought them over to the chimney-piece, to the conspicuous place occupied by the cup before Fanny's appropriation of it, and, after laying them carefully down, went back for what remained, the solid detached foot. With this she returned to the mantel-shelf, placing it with deliberation in the centre and then, for a minute, occupying herself as with the attempt to fit the other morsels together. The split, determined by the latent crack, was so sharp and so neat that if there had been anything to hold them the bowl might still, quite beautifully, a few steps away, have passed for uninjured. But, as there was, naturally, nothing to hold them but Maggie's hands, during the few moments the latter were so employed, she could only lay the almost equal parts of the vessel carefully beside their pedestal and leave them thus before her husband's eyes. She had proceeded without words, but quite as if with a sought effect-in spite of which it had all seemed to her to take a far longer time than anything she had ever so quickly accomplished. Amerigo said nothing either-though it was true that his silence had the gloss of the warning she doubtless appeared to admonish him to take: it was as if her manner hushed him to the proper observation of what she was doing. He should have no doubt of it whatever: she *knew* and her broken bowl was proof that she knew-yet the least part of her desire was to make him waste words. He would have to think-this she knew even better still; and all she was for the present concerned with was that he should be aware. She had taken him for aware all day, or at least for obscurely and instinctively anxious-as to that she had just committed herself to Fanny Assingham; but what she had been wrong about was the effect of his anxiety. His fear of staying away, as a marked symptom, had at least proved greater than his fear of coming in ; he had come in even at the risk of bringing it with him-and, ah, what more did she require now than her sense, established within the first minute or two, that he had brought it, however he might be steadying himself against dangers of betrayal by some wrong word, and that it was shut in there between them, the successive moments throbbing under it the while as the pulse of fever throbs under the doctor's thumb? Maggie's sense, in fine, in his presence, was that though the bowl had been broken, her reason hadn't; the reason for which she had made up her mind, the reason for which she had summoned her friend, the reason for which she had prepared the place for her husband's eyes; it was all one reason, and, as her intense little clutch held the matter, what had happened by Fanny's act and by his apprehension of it had not in the least happened to *her* but absolutely and directly to himself, as he must proceed to take in. There it

was that her wish for time interposed-time for Amerigo's use, not for hers, since she, for ever so long now, for hours and hours as they seemed, had been living with eternity; with which she would continue to live. She wanted to say to him, " Take it, take it, take all you need of it ; arrange yourself so as to suffer least, or to be, at any rate, least distorted and disfigured Only *see* see that *I* see, and make up your mind, on this new basis, at your convenience. Wait-it won't be long-till you can confer again with Charlotte, for you'll do it much better then-more easily to both of us. Above all don't show me, till you've got it well under, the dreadful blur, the ravage of suspense and embarrassment, produced, and produced by my doing, in your personal serenity, your incomparable superiority." After she had squared again her little objects on the chimney, she was within an ace, in fact, of turning on him with that appeal; besides its being lucid for her, all the while, that the occasion was passing, that they were dining out, that he wasn't dressed, and that, though she herself was, she was yet, in all probability, so horribly red in the face and so awry, in many ways, with agitation, that in view of the Ambassador's company, of possible comments and constructions, she should need, before her glass, some restoration of appearances.

Amerigo, meanwhile, after all, could clearly make the most of her having enjoined on him to wait — suggested it by the positive pomp of her dealings with the smashed cup; to wait, that is, till she should pronounce as Mrs. Assingham had promised for her. This delay, again, certainly tested her presence of mind — though that strain was not what presently made her speak. Keep her eyes, for the time, from her husband's as she might, she soon found herself much more drivingly conscious of the strain on his own wit. There was even a minute, when her back was turned to him, during which she knew once more the strangeness of her desire to spare him, a strangeness that had already, fifty times, brushed her, in the depth of her trouble, as with the wild wing of some bird of the air who might blindly have swooped for an instant into the shaft of a well, darkening there by his momentary flutter the far-off round of sky. It was extraordinary, this quality in the taste of her wrong which made her completed sense of it seem rather to soften than to harden and it was the more extraordinary the more she had to recognise it; for what it came to was that seeing herself finally sure, knowing everything, having the fact, in all its abomination, so utterly before her that there was nothing else to add — what it came to was that, merely by being WITH him there in silence, she felt, within her, the sudden split between conviction and action. They had begun to cease, on the spot, surprisingly, to be connected; conviction, that is, budged no inch, only planting its feet the more firmly in the soil — but action began to hover like some lighter and larger, but easier form, excited by its very power to keep above ground. It would be free, it would be independent, it would go in — wouldn't it? — for some prodigious and superior adventure of its own. What would condemn it, so to speak, to the responsibility of freedom — this glimmered on Maggie even now — was the possibility, richer with every lapsing moment, that her husband would have, on the whole question, a new need of her, a need which was in fact being born between them in these very seconds. It struck her truly as so new that he would have felt hitherto none to compare with it at all; would indeed, absolutely, by this circumstance, be REALLY needing her for the first one in their whole connection. No, he had used her, had even exceedingly enjoyed her, before this; but there had been no precedent for that character of a proved necessity to him which she was rapidly taking on. The immense advantage of this particular clue, moreover, was that she should have now to arrange, alter, to falsify nothing; should have to be but consistently simple and straight. She asked herself, with concentration, while her back was still presented, what would be the very ideal of that method; after which, the next instant, it had all come to her and she had turned round upon him for the application. "Fanny Assingham broke it — knowing it had a crack and that it would go if she used sufficient force. She thought, when I had told her, that that would be the best thing to do with it — thought so from her own point of view. That hadn't been at all my idea, but she acted before I understood. I had, on the contrary," she explained, "put it here, in full view, exactly that you might see."

He stood with his hands in his pockets; he had carried his eyes to the fragments on the chimney-piece, and she could already distinguish the element of relief, absolutely of succour, in his acceptance from her of the opportunity to consider the fruits of their friend's violence — every added inch of reflection and delay having the advantage, from this point on, of counting for him double. It had operated within her now to the last intensity, her glimpse of the precious truth that by her helping him, helping him to help himself, as it were, she should help him to help HER. Hadn't she fairly got into his labyrinth with him? — wasn't she indeed in the very act of placing herself there, for him, at its centre and core, whence, on that definite orientation and by an instinct all her own, she might securely guide him out of it? She offered him thus, assuredly, a kind of support that was not to have been imagined in advance, and that moreover required — ah most truly! — some

close looking at before it could be believed in and pronounced void of treachery. “Yes, look, look,” she seemed to see him hear her say even while her sounded words were other— “look, look, both at the truth that still survives in that smashed evidence and at the even more remarkable appearance that I’m not such a fool as you supposed me. Look at the possibility that, since I AM different, there may still be something in it for you — if you’re capable of working with me to get that out. Consider of course, as you must, the question of what you may have to surrender, on your side, what price you may have to pay, whom you may have to pay WITH, to set this advantage free; but take in, at any rate, that there is something for you if you don’t too blindly spoil your chance for it.” He went no nearer the damnatory pieces, but he eyed them, from where he stood, with a degree of recognition just visibly less to be dissimulated; all of which represented for her a certain traceable process. And her uttered words, meanwhile, were different enough from those he might have inserted between the lines of her already-spoken. “It’s the golden bowl, you know, that you saw at the little antiquario’s in Bloomsbury, so long ago — when you went there with Charlotte, when you spent those hours with her, unknown to me, a day or two before our marriage. It was shown you both, but you didn’t take it; you left it for me, and I came upon it, extraordinarily, through happening to go into the same shop on Monday last; in walking home, in prowling about to pick up some small old thing for father’s birthday, after my visit to the Museum, my appointment there with Mr. Crichton, of which I told you. It was shown me, and I was struck with it and took it — knowing nothing about it at the time. What I now know I’ve learned since — I learned this afternoon, a couple of hours ago; receiving from it naturally a great impression. So there it is — in its three pieces. You can handle them — don’t be afraid — if you want to make sure the thing is the thing you and Charlotte saw together. Its having come apart makes an unfortunate difference for its beauty, its artistic value, but none for anything else. Its other value is just the same — I mean that of its having given me so much of the truth about you. I don’t therefore so much care what becomes of it now — unless perhaps you may yourself, when you come to think, have some good use for it. In that case,” Maggie wound up, “we can easily take the pieces with us to Fawns.”

It was wonderful how she felt, by the time she had seen herself through this narrow pass, that she had really achieved something — that she was emerging a little, in fine, with the prospect less contracted. She had done for him, that is, what her instinct enjoined; had laid a basis not merely momentary on which he could meet her. When, by the turn of his head, he did finally meet her, this was the last thing that glimmered out of his look; but it came into sight, none the less, as a perception of his distress and almost as a question of his eyes; so that, for still another minute, before he committed himself, there occurred between them a kind of unprecedented moral exchange over which her superior lucidity presided. It was not, however, that when he did commit himself the show was promptly portentous. “But what in the world has Fanny Assingham had to do with it?”

She could verily, out of all her smothered soreness, almost have smiled: his question so affected her as giving the whole thing up to her. But it left her only to go the straighter. “She has had to do with it that I immediately sent for her and that she immediately came. She was the first person I wanted to see — because I knew she would know. Know more about what I had learned, I mean, than I could make out for myself. I made out as much as I could for myself — that I also wanted to have done; but it didn’t, in spite of everything, take me very far, and she has really been a help. Not so much as she would like to be — not so much as, poor dear, she just now tried to be; yet she has done her very best for you — never forget that! — and has kept me along immeasurably better than I should have been able to come without her. She has gained me time; and that, these three months, don’t you see? has been everything.”

She had said “Don’t you see?” on purpose, and was to feel the next moment that it had acted. “These three months’?” the Prince asked.

“Counting from the night you came home so late from Matcham. Counting from the hours you spent with Charlotte at Gloucester; your visit to the cathedral — which you won’t have forgotten describing to me in so much detail. For that was the beginning of my being sure. Before it I had been sufficiently in doubt. Sure,” Maggie developed, “of your having, and of your having for a long time had, TWO relations with Charlotte.”

He stared, a little at sea, as he took it up. “Two — ?”

Something in the tone of it gave it a sense, or an ambiguity, almost foolish — leaving Maggie to feel, as in a flash, how such a consequence, a foredoomed infelicity, partaking of the ridiculous even in one of the cleverest, might be of the very essence of the penalty of wrong-doing. “Oh, you may have had fifty — had the same relation with her fifty times! It’s of the number of KINDS of relation with her that I speak — a number

that doesn't matter, really, so long as there wasn't only one kind, as father and I supposed. One kind," she went on, "was there before us; we took that fully for granted, as you saw, and accepted it. We never thought of there being another, kept out of our sight. But after the evening I speak of I knew there was something else. As I say, I had, before that, my idea — which you never dreamed I had. From the moment I speak of it had more to go upon, and you became yourselves, you and she, vaguely, yet uneasily, conscious of the difference. But it's within these last hours that I've most seen where we are; and as I've been in communication with Fanny Assingham about my doubts, so I wanted to let her know my certainty — with the determination of which, however, you must understand, she has had nothing to do. She defends you," Maggie remarked.

He had given her all his attention, and with this impression for her, again, that he was, in essence, fairly reaching out to her for time — time, only time — she could sufficiently imagine, and to whatever strangeness, that he absolutely liked her to talk, even at the cost of his losing almost everything else by it. It was still, for a minute, as if he waited for something worse; wanted everything that was in her to come out, any definite fact, anything more precisely nameable, so that he too — as was his right — should know where he was. What stirred in him above all, while he followed in her face the clear train of her speech, must have been the impulse to take up something she put before him that he was yet afraid directly to touch. He wanted to make free with it, but had to keep his hands off — for reasons he had already made out; and the discomfort of his privation yearned at her out of his eyes with an announcing gleam of the fever, the none too tolerable chill, of specific recognition. She affected him as speaking more or less for her father as well, and his eyes might have been trying to hypnotise her into giving him the answer without his asking the question. "Had HE his idea, and has he now, with you, anything more?" — those were the words he had to hold himself from not speaking and that she would as yet, certainly, do nothing to make easy. She felt with her sharpest thrill how he was straitened and tied, and with the miserable pity of it her present conscious purpose of keeping him so could none the less perfectly accord. To name her father, on any such basis of anxiety, of compunction, would be to do the impossible thing, to do neither more nor less than give Charlotte away. Visibly, palpably, traceably, he stood off from this, moved back from it as from an open chasm now suddenly perceived, but which had been, between the two, with so much, so strangely much else, quite uncalculated. Verily it towered before her, this history of their confidence. They had built strong and piled high — based as it was on such appearances — their conviction that, thanks to her native complacencies of so many sorts, she would always, quite to the end and through and through, take them as nobly sparing her. Amerigo was at any rate having the sensation of a particular ugliness to avoid, a particular difficulty to count with, that practically found him as unprepared as if he had been, like his wife, an abjectly simple person. And she meanwhile, however abjectly simple, was further discerning, for herself, that, whatever he might have to take from her — she being, on her side, beautifully free — he would absolutely not be able, for any qualifying purpose, to name Charlotte either. As his father-in-law's wife Mrs. Verver rose between them there, for the time, in august and prohibitive form; to protect her, defend her, explain about her, was, at the least, to bring her into the question — which would be by the same stroke to bring her husband. But this was exactly the door Maggie wouldn't open to him; on all of which she was the next moment asking herself if, thus warned and embarrassed, he were not fairly writhing in his pain. He writhed, on that hypothesis, some seconds more, for it was not till then that he had chosen between what he could do and what he couldn't.

"You're apparently drawing immense conclusions from very small matters. Won't you perhaps feel, in fairness, that you're striking out, triumphing, or whatever I may call it, rather too easily — feel it when I perfectly admit that your smashed cup there does come back to me? I frankly confess, now, to the occasion, and to having wished not to speak of it to you at the time. We took two or three hours together, by arrangement; it WAS on the eve of my marriage — at the moment you say. But that put it on the eve of yours too, my dear — which was directly the point. It was desired to find for you, at the eleventh hour, some small wedding-present — a hunt, for something worth giving you, and yet possible from other points of view as well, in which it seemed I could be of use. You were naturally not to be told — precisely because it was all FOR you. We went forth together and we looked; we rummaged about and, as I remember we called it, we prowled; then it was that, as I freely recognise, we came across that crystal cup — which I'm bound to say, upon my honour, I think it rather a pity Fanny Assingham, from whatever good motive, should have treated so." He had kept his hands in his pockets; he turned his eyes again, but more complacently now, to the ruins of the precious vessel; and Maggie could feel him exhale into the achieved quietness of his explanation a long, deep breath of comparative relief. Behind everything, beneath everything, it was somehow a comfort to

him at last to be talking with her — and he seemed to be proving to himself that he COULD talk. “It was at a little shop in Bloomsbury — I think I could go to the place now. The man understood Italian, I remember; he wanted awfully to work off his bowl. But I didn’t believe in it, and we didn’t take it.”

Maggie had listened with an interest that wore all the expression of candour. “Oh, you left it for me. But what did you take?”

He looked at her; first as if he were trying to remember, then as if he might have been trying to forget. “Nothing, I think — at that place.”

“What did you take then at any other? What did you get me — since that was your aim and end — for a wedding-gift?”

The Prince continued very nobly to bethink himself. “Didn’t we get you anything?”

Maggie waited a little; she had for some time, now, kept her eyes on him steadily; but they wandered, at this, to the fragments on her chimney. “Yes; it comes round, after all, to your having got me the bowl. I myself was to come upon it, the other day, by so wonderful a chance; was to find it in the same place and to have it pressed upon me by the same little man, who does, as you say, understand Italian. I did ‘believe in it,’ you see — must have believed in it somehow instinctively; for I took it as soon as I saw it. Though I didn’t know at all then,” she added, “what I was taking WITH it.”

The Prince paid her for an instant, visibly, the deference of trying to imagine what this might have been. “I agree with you that the coincidence is extraordinary — the sort of thing that happens mainly in novels and plays. But I don’t see, you must let me say, the importance or the connexion—”

“Of my having made the purchase where you failed of it?” She had quickly taken him up; but she had, with her eyes on him once more, another drop into the order of her thoughts, to which, through whatever he might say, she was still adhering. “It’s not my having gone into the place, at the end of four years, that makes the strangeness of the coincidence; for don’t such chances as that, in London, easily occur? The strangeness,” she lucidly said, “is in what my purchase was to represent to me after I had got it home; which value came,” she explained, “from the wonder of my having found such a friend.”

“‘Such a friend’?” As a wonder, assuredly, her husband could but take it.

“As the little man in the shop. He did for me more than he knew — I owe it to him. He took an interest in me,” Maggie said; “and, taking that interest, he recalled your visit, he remembered you and spoke of you to me.”

On which the Prince passed the comment of a sceptical smile. “Ah but, my dear, if extraordinary things come from people’s taking an interest in you—”

“My life in that case,” she asked, “must be very agitated? Well, he liked me, I mean — very particularly. It’s only so I can account for my afterwards hearing from him — and in fact he gave me that to-day,” she pursued, “he gave me it frankly as his reason.”

“To-day?” the Prince inquiringly echoed.

But she was singularly able — it had been marvellously “given” her, she afterwards said to herself — to abide, for her light, for her clue, by her own order.

“I inspired him with sympathy — there you are! But the miracle is that he should have a sympathy to offer that could be of use to me. That was really the oddity of my chance,” the Princess proceeded— “that I should have been moved, in my ignorance, to go precisely to him.”

He saw her so keep her course that it was as if he could, at the best, but stand aside to watch her and let her pass; he only made a vague demonstration that was like an ineffective gesture. “I’m sorry to say any ill of your friends, and the thing was a long time ago; besides which there was nothing to make me recur to it. But I remember the man’s striking me as a decided little beast.”

She gave a slow headshake — as if, no, after consideration, not THAT way were an issue. “I can only think of him as kind, for he had nothing to gain. He had in fact only to lose. It was what he came to tell me — that he had asked me too high a price, more than the object was really worth. There was a particular reason, which he hadn’t mentioned, and which had made him consider and repent. He wrote for leave to see me again — wrote in such terms that I saw him here this afternoon.”

“Here?” — it made the Prince look about him.

“Downstairs — in the little red room. While he was waiting he looked at the few photographs that stand about there and recognised two of them. Though it was so long ago, he remembered the visit made him by the lady and the gentleman, and that gave him his connexion. It gave me mine, for he remembered everything and

told me everything. You see you too had produced your effect; only, unlike you, he had thought of it again — he HAD recurred to it. He told me of your having wished to make each other presents — but of that's not having come off. The lady was greatly taken with the piece I had bought of him, but you had your reason against receiving it from her, and you had been right. He would think that of you more than ever now," Maggie went on; "he would see how wisely you had guessed the flaw and how easily the bowl could be broken. I had bought it myself, you see, for a present — he knew I was doing that. This was what had worked in him — especially after the price I had paid."

Her story had dropped an instant; she still brought it out in small waves of energy, each of which spent its force; so that he had an opportunity to speak before this force was renewed. But the quaint thing was what he now said. "And what, pray, WAS the price?"

She paused again a little. "It was high, certainly — for those fragments. I think I feel, as I look at them there, rather ashamed to say."

The Prince then again looked at them; he might have been growing used to the sight. "But shall you at least get your money back?"

"Oh, I'm far from wanting it back — I feel so that I'm getting its worth." With which, before he could reply, she had a quick transition. "The great fact about the day we're talking of seems to me to have been, quite remarkably, that no present was then made me. If your undertaking had been for that, that was not at least what came of it."

"You received then nothing at all?" The Prince looked vague and grave, almost retrospectively concerned.

"Nothing but an apology for empty hands and empty pockets; which was made me — as if it mattered a mite! — ever so frankly, ever so beautifully and touchingly."

This Amerigo heard with interest, yet not with confusion. "Ah, of course you couldn't have minded!" Distinctly, as she went on, he was getting the better of the mere awkwardness of his arrest; quite as if making out that he need SUFFER arrest from her now — before they should go forth to show themselves in the world together — in no greater quantity than an occasion ill-chosen at the best for a scene might decently make room for. He looked at his watch; their engagement, all the while, remained before him. "But I don't make out, you see, what case against me you rest—"

"On everything I'm telling you? Why, the whole case — the case of your having for so long so successfully deceived me. The idea of your finding something for me — charming as that would have been — was what had least to do with your taking a morning together at that moment. What had really to do with it," said Maggie, "was that you had to: you couldn't not, from the moment you were again face to face. And the reason of that was that there had been so much between you before — before I came between you at all."

Her husband had been for these last moments moving about under her eyes; but at this, as to check any show of impatience, he again stood still. "You've never been more sacred to me than you were at that hour — unless perhaps you've become so at this one."

The assurance of his speech, she could note, quite held up its head in him; his eyes met her own so, for the declaration, that it was as if something cold and momentarily unimaginable breathed upon her, from afar off, out of his strange consistency. She kept her direction still, however, under that. "Oh, the thing I've known best of all is that you've never wanted, together, to offend us. You've wanted quite intensely not to, and the precautions you've had to take for it have been for a long time one of the strongest of my impressions. That, I think," she added, "is the way I've best known."

"Known?" he repeated after a moment.

"Known. Known that you were older friends, and so much more intimate ones, than I had any reason to suppose when we married. Known there were things that hadn't been told me — and that gave their meaning, little by little, to other things that were before me."

"Would they have made a difference, in the matter of our marriage," the Prince presently asked, "if you HAD known them?"

She took her time to think. "I grant you not — in the matter of OURS." And then as he again fixed her with his hard yearning, which he couldn't keep down: "The question is so much bigger than that. You see how much what I know makes of it for me." That was what acted on him, this iteration of her knowledge, into the question of the validity, of the various bearings of which, he couldn't on the spot trust himself to pretend, in any high way, to go. What her claim, as she made it, represented for him — that he couldn't help betraying, if only as a consequence of the effect of the word itself, her repeated distinct "know, know," on his nerves.

She was capable of being sorry for his nerves at a time when he should need them for dining out, pompously, rather responsibly, without his heart in it; yet she was not to let that prevent her using, with all economy, so precious a chance for supreme clearness. “I didn’t force this upon you, you must recollect, and it probably wouldn’t have happened for you if you hadn’t come in.”

“Ah,” said the Prince, “I was liable to come in, you know.”

“I didn’t think you were this evening.”

“And why not?”

“Well,” she answered, “you have many liabilities — of different sorts.” With which she recalled what she had said to Fanny Assingham. “And then you’re so deep.”

It produced in his features, in spite of his control of them, one of those quick plays of expression, the shade of a grimace, that testified as nothing else did to his race. “It’s you, cara, who are deep.”

Which, after an instant, she had accepted from him; she could so feel at last that it was true. “Then I shall have need of it all.”

“But what would you have done,” he was by this time asking, “if I HADN’T come in?”

“I don’t know.” She had hesitated. “What would you?”

“Oh; I oh — that isn’t the question. I depend upon you. I go on. You would have spoken to-morrow?”

“I think I would have waited.”

“And for what?” he asked.

“To see what difference it would make for myself. My possession at last, I mean, of real knowledge.”

“Oh!” said the Prince.

“My only point now, at any rate,” she went on, “is the difference, as I say, that it may make for YOU. Your knowing was — from the moment you did come in — all I had in view.” And she sounded it again — he should have it once more. “Your knowing that I’ve ceased—”

“That you’ve ceased — ?” With her pause, in fact, she had fairly made him press her for it.

“Why, to be as I was. NOT to know.”

It was once more then, after a little, that he had had to stand receptive; yet the singular effect of this was that there was still something of the same sort he was made to want. He had another hesitation, but at last this odd quantity showed. “Then does any one else know?”

It was as near as he could come to naming her father, and she kept him at that distance. “Any one — ?”

“Any one, I mean, but Fanny Assingham.”

“I should have supposed you had had by this time particular means of learning. I don’t see,” she said, “why you ask me.”

Then, after an instant — and only after an instant, as she saw — he made out what she meant; and it gave her, all strangely enough, the still further light that Charlotte, for herself, knew as little as he had known. The vision loomed, in this light, it fairly glared, for the few seconds — the vision of the two others alone together at Fawns, and Charlotte, as one of them, having gropingly to go on, always not knowing and not knowing! The picture flushed at the same time with all its essential colour — that of the so possible identity of her father’s motive and principle with her own. HE was “deep,” as Amerigo called it, so that no vibration of the still air should reach his daughter; just as she had earned that description by making and by, for that matter, intending still to make, her care for his serenity, or at any rate for the firm outer shell of his dignity, all marvellous enamel, her paramount law. More strangely even than anything else, her husband seemed to speak now but to help her in this. “I know nothing but what you tell me.”

“Then I’ve told you all I intended. Find out the rest — !”

“Find it out — ?” He waited.

She stood before him a moment — it took that time to go on. Depth upon depth of her situation, as she met his face, surged and sank within her; but with the effect somehow, once more, that they rather lifted her than let her drop. She had her feet somewhere, through it all — it was her companion, absolutely, who was at sea. And she kept her feet; she pressed them to what was beneath her. She went over to the bell beside the chimney and gave a ring that he could but take as a summons for her maid. It stopped everything for the present; it was an intimation to him to go and dress. But she had to insist. “Find out for yourself!”

PART FIFTH

XXXV

After the little party was again constituted at Fawns — which had taken, for completeness, some ten days — Maggie naturally felt herself still more possessed, in spirit, of everything that had last happened in London. There was a phrase that came back to her from old American years: she was having, by that idiom, the time of her life — she knew it by the perpetual throb of this sense of possession, which was almost too violent either to recognise or to hide. It was as if she had come out — that was her most general consciousness; out of a dark tunnel, a dense wood, or even simply a smoky room, and had thereby, at least, for going on, the advantage of air in her lungs. It was as if she were somehow at last gathering in the fruits of patience; she had either been really more patient than she had known at the time, or had been so for longer: the change brought about by itself as great a difference of view as the shift of an inch in the position of a telescope. It was her telescope in fact that had gained in range — just as her danger lay in her exposing herself to the observation by the more charmed, and therefore the more reckless, use of this optical resource. Not under any provocation to produce it in public was her unremitted rule; but the difficulties of duplicity had not shrunk, while the need of it had doubled. Humbugging, which she had so practised with her father, had been a comparatively simple matter on the basis of mere doubt; but the ground to be covered was now greatly larger, and she felt not unlike some young woman of the theatre who, engaged for a minor part in the play and having mastered her cues with anxious effort, should find herself suddenly promoted to leading lady and expected to appear in every act of the five. She had made much to her husband, that last night, of her "knowing"; but it was exactly this quantity she now knew that, from the moment she could only dissimulate it, added to her responsibility and made of the latter all a mere question of having something precious and precarious in charge. There was no one to help her with it — not even Fanny Assingham now; this good friend's presence having become, inevitably, with that climax of their last interview in Portland Place, a severely simplified function. She had her use, oh yes, a thousand times; but it could only consist henceforth in her quite conspicuously touching at no point whatever — assuredly, at least with Maggie — the matter they had discussed. She was there, inordinately, as a value, but as a value only for the clear negation of everything. She was their general sign, precisely, of unimpaired beatitude — and she was to live up to that somewhat arduous character, poor thing, as she might. She might privately lapse from it, if she must, with Amerigo or with Charlotte — only not, of course, ever, so much as for the wink of an eye, with the master of the house. Such lapses would be her own affair, which Maggie at present could take no thought of. She treated her young friend meanwhile, it was to be said, to no betrayal of such wavering; so that from the moment of her alighting at the door with the Colonel everything went on between them at concert pitch. What had she done, that last evening in Maggie's room, but bring the husband and wife more together than, as would seem, they had ever been? Therefore what indiscretion should she not show by attempting to go behind the grand appearance of her success? — which would be to court a doubt of her beneficent work. She knew accordingly nothing but harmony and diffused, restlessly, nothing but peace — an extravagant, expressive, aggressive peace, not incongruous, after all, with the solid calm of the place; a kind of helmetted, trident-shaking pax Britannica.

The peace, it must be added, had become, as the days elapsed, a peace quite generally animated and peopled — thanks to that fact of the presence of "company" in which Maggie's ability to preserve an appearance had learned, from so far back, to find its best resource. It was not inconspicuous, it was in fact striking, that this resource, just now, seemed to meet in the highest degree every one's need: quite as if every one were, by the multiplication of human objects in the scene, by the creation, by the confusion, of fictive issues, hopeful of escaping somebody else's notice. It had reached the point, in truth, that the collective bosom might have been taken to heave with the knowledge of the descent upon adjacent shores, for a short period, of Mrs. Rance and the Lutches, still united, and still so divided, for conquest: the sense of the party showed at least, oddly enough, as favourable to the fancy of the quaint turn that some near "week-end" might derive from their reappearance. This measured for Maggie the ground they had all travelled together since that unforgotten afternoon of the none so distant year, that determinant September Sunday when, sitting with her father in the park, as in commemoration of the climax both of their old order and of their old danger, she had proposed to him that they should "call in" Charlotte, — call her in as a specialist might be summoned to an invalid's chair. Wasn't it a sign of something rather portentous, their being ready to be beholden, as for a diversion, to the once despised Kitty and Dotty? That had already had its application, in truth, to her invocation of the Castledeans and several other members, again, of the historic Matcham week, made before

she left town, and made, always consistently, with an idea — since she was never henceforth to approach these people without an idea, and since that lurid element of their intercourse grew and grew for her with each occasion. The flame with which it burned afresh during these particular days, the way it held up the torch to anything, to everything, that MIGHT have occurred as the climax of revels springing from traditions so vivified — this by itself justified her private motive and reconsecrated her diplomacy. She had already produced by the aid of these people something of the effect she sought — that of being "good" for whatever her companions were good for, and of not asking either of them to give up anyone or anything for her sake. There was moreover, frankly, a sharpness of point in it that she enjoyed; it gave an accent to the truth she wished to illustrate — the truth that the surface of her recent life, thick-sown with the flower of earnest endeavour, with every form of the unruffled and the undoubting, suffered no symptom anywhere to peep out. It was as if, under her pressure, neither party could get rid of the complicity, as it might be figured, of the other; as if, in a word, she saw Amerigo and Charlotte committed, for fear of betrayals on their own side, to a kind of wan consistency on the subject of Lady Castledean's "set," and this latter group, by the same stroke, compelled to assist at attestations the extent and bearing of which they rather failed to grasp and which left them indeed, in spite of hereditary high spirits, a trifle bewildered and even a trifle scared.

They made, none the less, at Fawns, for number, for movement, for sound — they played their parts during a crisis that must have hovered for them, in the long passages of the old house, after the fashion of the established ghost, felt, through the dark hours as a constant possibility, rather than have menaced them in the form of a daylight bore, one of the perceived outsiders who are liable to be met in the drawing-room or to be sat next to at dinner. If the Princess, moreover, had failed of her occult use for so much of the machinery of diversion, she would still have had a sense not other than sympathetic for the advantage now extracted from it by Fanny Assingham's bruised philosophy. This good friend's relation to it was actually the revanche, she sufficiently indicated, of her obscured lustre at Matcham, where she had known her way about so much less than most of the others. She knew it at Fawns, through the pathless wild of the right tone, positively better than any one, Maggie could note for her; and her revenge had the magnanimity of a brave pointing out of it to every one else, a wonderful irresistible, conscious, almost compassionate patronage. Here was a house, she triumphantly caused it to be noted, in which she so bristled with values that some of them might serve, by her amused willingness to share, for such of the temporarily vague, among her fellow-guests, such of the dimly disconcerted, as had lost the key to their own. It may have been partly through the effect of this especial strain of community with her old friend that Maggie found herself, one evening, moved to take up again their dropped directness of reference. They had remained downstairs together late; the other women of the party had filed, singly or in couples, up the "grand" staircase on which, from the equally grand hall, these retreats and advances could always be pleasantly observed; the men had apparently taken their way to the smoking-room; while the Princess, in possession thus of a rare reach of view, had lingered as if to enjoy it. Then she saw that Mrs. Assingham was remaining a little — and as for the appreciation of her enjoyment; upon which they stood looking at each other across the cleared prospect until the elder woman, only vaguely expressive and tentative now, came nearer. It was like the act of asking if there were anything she could yet do, and that question was answered by her immediately feeling, on this closer view, as she had felt when presenting herself in Portland Place after Maggie's last sharp summons. Their understanding was taken up by these new snatched moments where that occasion had left it.

"He has never told her that I know. Of that I'm at last satisfied." And then as Mrs. Assingham opened wide eyes: "I've been in the dark since we came down, not understanding what he has been doing or intending — not making out what can have passed between them. But within a day or two I've begun to suspect, and this evening, for reasons — oh, too many to tell you! — I've been sure, since it explains. NOTHING has passed between them — that's what has happened. It explains," the Princess repeated with energy; "it explains, it explains!" She spoke in a manner that her auditor was afterwards to describe to the Colonel, oddly enough, as that of the quietest excitement; she had turned back to the chimney-place, where, in honour of a damp day and a chill night, the piled logs had turned to flame and sunk to embers; and the evident intensity of her vision for the fact she imparted made Fanny Assingham wait upon her words. It explained, this striking fact, more indeed than her companion, though conscious of fairly gaping with good-will, could swallow at once. The Princess, however, as for indulgence and confidence, quickly filled up the measure. "He hasn't let her know that I know — and, clearly, doesn't mean to. He has made up his mind; he'll say nothing about it. Therefore, as she's quite unable to arrive at the knowledge by herself, she has no idea how much I'm really in

possession. She believes," said Maggie, "and, so far as her own conviction goes, she knows, that I'm not in possession of anything. And that, somehow, for my own help seems to me immense."

"Immense, my dear!" Mrs. Assingham applausively murmured, though not quite, even as yet, seeing all the way. "He's keeping quiet then on purpose?"

"On purpose." Maggie's lighted eyes, at least, looked further than they had ever looked. "He'll NEVER tell her now."

Fanny wondered; she cast about her; most of all she admired her little friend, in whom this announcement was evidently animated by an heroic lucidity. She stood there, in her full uniform, like some small erect commander of a siege, an anxious captain who has suddenly got news, replete with importance for him, of agitation, of division within the place. This importance breathed upon her comrade. "So you're all right?"

"Oh, ALL right's a good deal to say. But I seem at least to see, as I haven't before, where I am with it."

Fanny bountifully brooded; there was a point left vague. "And you have it from him? — your husband himself has told you?"

"'Told' me — ?"

"Why, what you speak of. It isn't of an assurance received from him then that you do speak?"

At which Maggie had continued to stare. "Dear me, no. Do you suppose I've asked him for an assurance?"

"Ah, you haven't?" Her companion smiled. "That's what I supposed you MIGHT mean. Then, darling, what HAVE you — ?"

"Asked him for? I've asked him for nothing."

But this, in turn, made Fanny stare. "Then nothing, that evening of the Embassy dinner, passed between you?"

"On the contrary, everything passed."

"Everything — ?"

"Everything. I told him what I knew — and I told him how I knew it."

Mrs. Assingham waited. "And that was all?"

"Wasn't it quite enough?"

"Oh, love," she bridled, "that's for you to have judged!"

"Then I HAVE judged," said Maggie— "I did judge. I made sure he understood — then I let him alone."

Mrs. Assingham wondered. "But he didn't explain — ?"

"Explain? Thank God, no!" Maggie threw back her head as with horror at the thought, then the next moment added: "And I didn't, either."

The decency of pride in it shed a cold little light — yet as from heights at the base of which her companion rather panted. "But if he neither denies nor confesses — ?"

"He does what's a thousand times better — he lets it alone. He does," Maggie went on, "as he would do; as I see now that I was sure he would. He lets me alone."

Fanny Assingham turned it over. "Then how do you know so where, as you say, you 'are'?"

"Why, just BY that. I put him in possession of the difference; the difference made, about me, by the fact that I hadn't been, after all — though with a wonderful chance, I admitted, helping me — too stupid to have arrived at knowledge. He had to see that I'm changed for him — quite changed from the idea of me that he had so long been going on with. It became a question then of his really taking in the change — and what I now see is that he is doing so."

Fanny followed as she could. "Which he shows by letting you, as you say, alone?"

Maggie looked at her a minute. "And by letting her."

Mrs. Assingham did what she might to embrace it — checked a little, however, by a thought that was the nearest approach she could have, in this almost too large air, to an inspiration. "Ah, but does Charlotte let HIM?"

"Oh, that's another affair — with which I've practically nothing to do. I dare say, however, she doesn't." And the Princess had a more distant gaze for the image evoked by the question. "I don't in fact well see how she CAN. But the point for me is that he understands."

"Yes," Fanny Assingham cooed, "understands — ?"

"Well, what I want. I want a happiness without a hole in it big enough for you to poke in your finger."

"A brilliant, perfect surface — to begin with at least. I see."

"The golden bowl — as it WAS to have been." And Maggie dwelt musingly on this obscured figure. "The

bowl with all our happiness in it. The bowl without the crack."

For Mrs. Assingham too the image had its force, and the precious object shone before her again, reconstituted, plausible, presentable. But wasn't there still a piece missing? "Yet if he lets you alone and you only let him — ?"

"Mayn't our doing so, you mean, be noticed? — mayn't it give us away? Well, we hope not — we try not — we take such care. We alone know what's between us — we and you; and haven't you precisely been struck, since you've been here," Maggie asked, "with our making so good a show?"

Her friend hesitated. "To your father?"

But it made her hesitate too; she wouldn't speak of her father directly. "To everyone. To her — now that you understand."

It held poor Fanny again in wonder. "To Charlotte — yes: if there's so much beneath it, for you, and if it's all such a plan. That makes it hang together it makes YOU hang together." She fairly exhaled her admiration. "You're like nobody else — you're extraordinary."

Maggie met it with appreciation, but with a reserve. "No, I'm not extraordinary — but I AM, for every one, quiet."

"Well, that's just what is extraordinary. 'Quiet' is more than *I* am, and you leave me far behind." With which, again, for an instant, Mrs. Assingham frankly brooded. "'Now that I understand,' you say — but there's one thing I don't understand." And the next minute, while her companion waited, she had mentioned it. "How can Charlotte, after all, not have pressed him, not have attacked him about it? How can she not have asked him — asked him on his honour, I mean — if you know?"

"How can she 'not'? Why, of course," said the Princess limpidly, "she MUST!"

"Well then — ?"

"Well then, you think, he must have told her? Why, exactly what I mean," said Maggie, "is that he will have done nothing of the sort; will, as I say, have maintained the contrary."

Fanny Assingham weighed it. "Under her direct appeal for the truth?"

"Under her direct appeal for the truth."

"Her appeal to his honour?"

"Her appeal to his honour. That's my point."

Fanny Assingham braved it. "For the truth as from him to her?"

"From him to any one."

Mrs. Assingham's face lighted. "He'll simply, he'll insistently have lied?"

Maggie brought it out roundly. "He'll simply, he'll insistently have lied."

It held again her companion, who next, however, with a single movement, throwing herself on her neck, overflowed. "Oh, if you knew how you help me!"

Maggie had liked her to understand, so far as this was possible; but had not been slow to see afterwards how the possibility was limited, when one came to think, by mysteries she was not to sound. This inability in her was indeed not remarkable, inasmuch as the Princess herself, as we have seen, was only now in a position to boast of touching bottom. Maggie lived, inwardly, in a consciousness that she could but partly open even to so good a friend, and her own visitation of the fuller expanse of which was, for that matter, still going on. They had been duskier still, however, these recesses of her imagination — that, no doubt, was what might at present be said for them. She had looked into them, on the eve of her leaving town, almost without penetration: she had made out in those hours, and also, of a truth, during the days which immediately followed, little more than the strangeness of a relation having for its chief mark — whether to be prolonged or not — the absence of any "intimate" result of the crisis she had invited her husband to recognise. They had dealt with this crisis again, face to face, very briefly, the morning after the scene in her room — but with the odd consequence of her having appeared merely to leave it on his hands. He had received it from her as he might have received a bunch of keys or a list of commissions — attentive to her instructions about them, but only putting them, for the time, very carefully and safely, into his pocket. The instructions had seemed, from day to day, to make so little difference for his behaviour — that is for his speech or his silence; to produce, as yet, so little of the fruit of action. He had taken from her, on the spot, in a word, before going to dress for dinner, all she then had to give — after which, on the morrow, he had asked her for more, a good deal as if she might have renewed her supply during the night; but he had had at his command for this latter purpose an air of extraordinary detachment and discretion, an air amounting really to an appeal which, if she could have

brought herself to describe it vulgarly, she would have described as cool, just as he himself would have described it in any one else as “cheeky”; a suggestion that she should trust him on the particular ground since she didn’t on the general. Neither his speech nor his silence struck her as signifying more, or less, under this pressure, than they had seemed to signify for weeks past; yet if her sense hadn’t been absolutely closed to the possibility in him of any thought of wounding her, she might have taken his undisturbed manner, the perfection of his appearance of having recovered himself, for one of those intentions of high impertinence by the aid of which great people, les grands seigneurs, persons of her husband’s class and type, always know how to re-establish a violated order.

It was her one purely good fortune that she could feel thus sure impertinence — to HER at any rate — was not among the arts on which he proposed to throw himself; for though he had, in so almost mystifying a manner, replied to nothing, denied nothing, explained nothing, apologised for nothing, he had somehow conveyed to her that this was not because of any determination to treat her case as not “worth” it. There had been consideration, on both occasions, in the way he had listened to her — even though at the same time there had been extreme reserve; a reserve indeed, it was also to be remembered, qualified by the fact that, on their second and shorter interview, in Portland Place, and quite at the end of this passage, she had imagined him positively proposing to her a temporary accommodation. It had been but the matter of something in the depths of the eyes he finally fixed upon her, and she had found in it, the more she kept it before her, the tacitly-offered sketch of a working arrangement. “Leave me my reserve; don’t question it — it’s all I have, just now, don’t you see? so that, if you’ll make me the concession of letting me alone with it for as long a time as I require, I promise you something or other, grown under cover of it, even though I don’t yet quite make out what, as a return for your patience.” She had turned away from him with some such unspoken words as that in her ear, and indeed she had to represent to herself that she had spiritually heard them, had to listen to them still again, to explain her particular patience in face of his particular failure. He hadn’t so much as pretended to meet for an instant the question raised by her of her accepted ignorance of the point in time, the period before their own marriage, from which his intimacy with Charlotte dated. As an ignorance in which he and Charlotte had been personally interested — and to the pitch of consummately protecting, for years, each other’s interest — as a condition so imposed upon her the fact of its having ceased might have made it, on the spot, the first article of his defence. He had vouchsafed it, however, nothing better than his longest stare of postponed consideration. That tribute he had coldly paid it, and Maggie might herself have been stupefied, truly, had she not had something to hold on by, at her own present ability, even provisional, to make terms with a chapter of history into which she could but a week before not have dipped without a mortal chill. At the rate at which she was living she was getting used hour by hour to these extensions of view; and when she asked herself, at Fawns, to what single observation of her own, in London, the Prince had had an affirmation to oppose, she but just failed to focus the small strained wife of the moments in question as some panting dancer of a difficult step who had capered, before the footlights of an empty theatre, to a spectator lounging in a box.

Her best comprehension of Amerigo’s success in not committing himself was in her recall, meanwhile, of the inquiries he had made of her on their only return to the subject, and which he had in fact explicitly provoked their return in order to make. He had had it over with her again, the so distinctly remarkable incident of her interview at home with the little Bloomsbury shopman. This anecdote, for him, had, not altogether surprisingly, required some straighter telling, and the Prince’s attitude in presence of it had represented once more his nearest approach to a cross-examination. The difficulty in respect to the little man had been for the question of his motive — his motive in writing, first, in the spirit of retraction, to a lady with whom he had made a most advantageous bargain, and in then coming to see her so that his apology should be personal. Maggie had felt her explanation weak; but there were the facts, and she could give no other. Left alone, after the transaction, with the knowledge that his visitor designed the object bought of him as a birthday-gift to her father — for Maggie confessed freely to having chattered to him almost as to a friend — the vendor of the golden bowl had acted on a scruple rare enough in vendors of any class, and almost unprecedented in the thrifty children of Israel. He hadn’t liked what he had done, and what he had above all made such a “good thing” of having done; at the thought of his purchaser’s good faith and charming presence, opposed to that flaw in her acquestion which would make it, verily, as an offering to a loved parent, a thing of sinister meaning and evil effect, he had known conscientious, he had known superstitious visitings, had given way to a whim all the more remarkable to his own commercial mind, no doubt, from its never having troubled

him in other connexions. She had recognised the oddity of her adventure and left it to show for what it was. She had not been unconscious, on the other hand, that if it hadn't touched Amerigo so nearly he would have found in it matter for some amused reflection. He had uttered an extraordinary sound, something between a laugh and a howl, on her saying, as she had made a point of doing: "Oh, most certainly, he TOLD me his reason was because he 'liked' me" — though she remained in doubt of whether that inarticulate comment had been provoked most by the familiarities she had offered or by those that, so pictured, she had had to endure. That the partner of her bargain had yearned to see her again, that he had plainly jumped at a pretext for it, this also she had frankly expressed herself to the Prince as having, in no snubbing, no scandalised, but rather in a positively appreciative and indebted spirit, not delayed to make out. He had wished, ever so seriously, to return her a part of her money, and she had wholly declined to receive it; and then he had uttered his hope that she had not, at all events, already devoted the crystal cup to the beautiful purpose she had, so kindly and so fortunately, named to him. It wasn't a thing for a present to a person she was fond of, for she wouldn't wish to give a present that would bring ill luck. That had come to him — so that he couldn't rest, and he should feel better now that he had told her. His having led her to act in ignorance was what he should have been ashamed of; and, if she would pardon, gracious lady as she was, all the liberties he had taken, she might make of the bowl any use in life but that one.

It was after this that the most extraordinary incident of all, of course, had occurred — his pointing to the two photographs with the remark that those were persons he knew, and that, more wonderful still, he had made acquaintance with them, years before, precisely over the same article. The lady, on that occasion, had taken up the fancy of presenting it to the gentleman, and the gentleman, guessing and dodging ever so cleverly, had declared that he wouldn't for the world receive an object under such suspicion. He himself, the little man had confessed, wouldn't have minded — about THEM; but he had never forgotten either their talk or their faces, the impression altogether made by them, and, if she really wished to know, now, what had perhaps most moved him, it was the thought that she should ignorantly have gone in for a thing not good enough for other buyers. He had been immensely struck — that was another point — with this accident of their turning out, after so long, friends of hers too: they had disappeared, and this was the only light he had ever had upon them. He had flushed up, quite red, with his recognition, with all his responsibility — had declared that the connexion must have had, mysteriously, something to do with the impulse he had obeyed. And Maggie had made, to her husband, while he again stood before her, no secret of the shock, for herself, so suddenly and violently received. She had done her best, even while taking it full in the face, not to give herself away; but she wouldn't answer — no, she wouldn't — for what she might, in her agitation, have made her informant think. He might think what he would — there had been three or four minutes during which, while she asked him question upon question, she had doubtless too little cared. And he had spoken, for his remembrance, as fully as she could have wished; he had spoken, oh, delightedly, for the "terms" on which his other visitors had appeared to be with each other, and in fact for that conviction of the nature and degree of their intimacy under which, in spite of precautions, they hadn't been able to help leaving him. He had observed and judged and not forgotten; he had been sure they were great people, but no, ah no, distinctly, hadn't "liked" them as he liked the Signora Principessa. Certainly — she had created no vagueness about that — he had been in possession of her name and address, for sending her both her cup and her account. But the others he had only, always, wondered about — he had been sure they would never come back. And as to the time of their visit, he could place it, positively, to a day — by reason of a transaction of importance, recorded in his books, that had occurred but a few hours later. He had left her, in short, definitely rejoicing that he had been able to make up to her for not having been quite "square" over their little business by rendering her, so unexpectedly, the service of this information. His joy, moreover, was — as much as Amerigo would! — a matter of the personal interest with which her kindness, gentleness, grace, her charming presence and easy humanity and familiarity, had inspired him. All of which, while, in thought, Maggie went over it again and again — oh, over any imputable rashness of her own immediate passion and pain, as well as over the rest of the straight little story she had, after all, to tell — might very conceivably make a long sum for the Prince to puzzle out.

There were meanwhile, after the Castledeans and those invited to meet them had gone, and before Mrs. Rance and the Lutches had come, three or four days during which she was to learn the full extent of her need not to be penetrable; and then it was indeed that she felt all the force, and threw herself upon all the help, of the truth she had confided, several nights earlier, to Fanny Assingham. She had known it in advance, had

warned herself of it while the house was full: Charlotte had designs upon her of a nature best known to herself, and was only waiting for the better opportunity of their finding themselves less companioned. This consciousness had been exactly at the bottom of Maggie's wish to multiply their spectators; there were moments for her, positively, moments of planned postponement, of evasion scarcely less disguised than studied, during which she turned over with anxiety the different ways — there being two or three possible ones — in which her young stepmother might, at need, seek to work upon her. Amerigo's not having "told" her of his passage with his wife gave, for Maggie, altogether a new aspect to Charlotte's consciousness and condition — an aspect with which, for apprehension, for wonder, and even, at moments, inconsequently enough, for something like compassion, the Princess had now to reckon. She asked herself — for she was capable of that — what he had MEANT by keeping the sharer of his guilt in the dark about a matter touching her otherwise so nearly; what he had meant, that is, for this unmistakably mystified personage herself. Maggie could imagine what he had meant for her — all sorts of thinkable things, whether things of mere "form" or things of sincerity, things of pity or things of prudence: he had meant, for instance, in all probability, primarily, to conjure away any such appearance of a changed relation between the two women as his father-in-law might notice and follow up. It would have been open to him however, given the pitch of their intimacy, to avert this danger by some more conceivable course with Charlotte; since an earnest warning, in fact, the full freedom of alarm, that of his insisting to her on the peril of suspicion incurred, and on the importance accordingly of outward peace at any price, would have been the course really most conceivable. Instead of warning and advising he had reassured and deceived her; so that our young woman, who had been, from far back, by the habit, if her nature, as much on her guard against sacrificing others as if she felt the great trap of life mainly to be set for one's doing so, now found herself attaching her fancy to that side of the situation of the exposed pair which involved, for themselves at least, the sacrifice of the least fortunate.

She never, at present, thought of what Amerigo might be intending, without the reflection, by the same stroke, that, whatever this quantity, he was leaving still more to her own ingenuity. He was helping her, when the thing came to the test, only by the polished, possibly almost too polished surface his manner to his wife wore for an admiring world; and that, surely, was entitled to scarcely more than the praise of negative diplomacy. He was keeping his manner right, as she had related to Mrs. Assingham; the case would have been beyond calculation, truly, if, on top of everything, he had allowed it to go wrong. She had hours of exaltation indeed when the meaning of all this pressed in upon her as a tacit vow from him to abide without question by whatever she should be able to achieve or think fit to prescribe. Then it was that, even while holding her breath for the awe of it, she truly felt almost able enough for anything. It was as if she had passed, in a time incredibly short, from being nothing for him to being all; it was as if, rightly noted, every turn of his head, every tone of his voice, in these days, might mean that there was but one way in which a proud man reduced to abjection could hold himself. During those of Maggie's vigils in which that view loomed largest, the image of her husband that it thus presented to her gave out a beauty for the revelation of which she struck herself as paying, if anything, all too little. To make sure of it — to make sure of the beauty shining out of the humility, and of the humility lurking in all the pride of his presence — she would have gone the length of paying more yet, of paying with difficulties and anxieties compared to which those actually before her might have been as superficial as headaches or rainy days.

The point at which these exaltations dropped, however, was the point at which it was apt to come over her that if her complications had been greater the question of paying would have been limited still less to the liabilities of her own pocket. The complications were verily great enough, whether for ingenuities or sublimities, so long as she had to come back to it so often that Charlotte, all the while, could only be struggling with secrets sharper than her own. It was odd how that certainty again and again determined and coloured her wonderments of detail; the question, for instance, of HOW Amerigo, in snatched opportunities of conference, put the haunted creature off with false explanations, met her particular challenges and evaded — if that was what he did do! — her particular demands. Even the conviction that Charlotte was but awaiting some chance really to test her trouble upon her lover's wife left Maggie's sense meanwhile open as to the sight of gilt wires and bruised wings, the spacious but suspended cage, the home of eternal unrest, of pacings, beatings, shakings, all so vain, into which the baffled consciousness helplessly resolved itself. The cage was the deluded condition, and Maggie, as having known delusion — rather! — understood the nature of cages. She walked round Charlotte's — cautiously and in a very wide circle; and when, inevitably, they had to communicate she felt herself, comparatively, outside, on the breast of nature, and saw her companion's face

as that of a prisoner looking through bars. So it was that through bars, bars richly gilt, but firmly, though discreetly, planted, Charlotte finally struck her as making a grim attempt; from which, at first, the Princess drew back as instinctively as if the door of the cage had suddenly been opened from within.

XXXVI

They had been alone that evening — alone as a party of six, and four of them, after dinner, under suggestion not to be resisted, sat down to "bridge" in the smoking-room. They had passed together to that apartment, on rising from table, Charlotte and Mrs. Assingham alike indulgent, always, to tobacco, and in fact practising an emulation which, as Fanny said, would, for herself, had the Colonel not issued an interdict based on the fear of her stealing his cigars, have stopped only at the short pipe. Here cards had with inevitable promptness asserted their rule, the game forming itself, as had often happened before, of Mr. Verver with Mrs. Assingham for partner and of the Prince with Mrs. Verver. The Colonel, who had then asked of Maggie license to relieve his mind of a couple of letters for the earliest post out on the morrow, was addressing himself to this task at the other end of the room, and the Princess herself had welcomed the comparatively hushed hour — for the bridge-players were serious and silent — much in the mood of a tired actress who has the good fortune to be "off," while her mates are on, almost long enough for a nap on the property sofa in the wing. Maggie's nap, had she been able to snatch forty winks, would have been of the spirit rather than of the sense; yet as she subsided, near a lamp, with the last salmon-coloured French periodical, she was to fail, for refreshment, even of that sip of independence.

There was no question for her, as she found, of closing her eyes and getting away; they strayed back to life, in the stillness, over the top of her Review; she could lend herself to none of those refinements of the higher criticism with which its pages bristled; she was there, where her companions were, there again and more than ever there; it was as if, of a sudden, they had been made, in their personal intensity and their rare complexity of relation, freshly importunate to her. It was the first evening there had been no one else. Mrs. Rance and the Lutches were due the next day; but meanwhile the facts of the situation were upright for her round the green cloth and the silver flambeaux; the fact of her father's wife's lover facing his mistress; the fact of her father sitting, all unsounded and unblinking, between them; the fact of Charlotte keeping it up, keeping up everything, across the table, with her husband beside her; the fact of Fanny Assingham, wonderful creature, placed opposite to the three and knowing more about each, probably, when one came to think, than either of them knew of either. Erect above all for her was the sharp-edged fact of the relation of the whole group, individually and collectively, to herself — herself so speciously eliminated for the hour, but presumably more present to the attention of each than the next card to be played.

Yes, under that imputation, to her sense, they sat — the imputation of wondering, beneath and behind all their apparently straight play, if she weren't really watching them from her corner and consciously, as might be said, holding them in her hand. She was asking herself at last how they could bear it — for, though cards were as nought to her and she could follow no move, so that she was always, on such occasions, out of the party, they struck her as conforming alike, in the matter of gravity and propriety, to the stiff standard of the house. Her father, she knew, was a high adept, one of the greatest — she had been ever, in her stupidity, his small, his sole despair; Amerigo excelled easily, as he understood and practised every art that could beguile large leisure; Mrs. Assingham and Charlotte, moreover, were accounted as "good" as members of a sex incapable of the nobler consistency could be. Therefore, evidently, they were not, all so up to their usual form, merely passing it off, whether for her or for themselves; and the amount of enjoyed, or at least achieved, security represented by so complete a conquest of appearances was what acted on her nerves, precisely, with a kind of provocative force. She found herself, for five minutes, thrilling with the idea of the prodigious effect that, just as she sat there near them, she had at her command; with the sense that if she were but different — oh, ever so different! — all this high decorum would hang by a hair. There reigned for her, absolutely, during these vertiginous moments, that fascination of the monstrous, that temptation of the horribly possible, which we so often trace by its breaking out suddenly, lest it should go further, in unexplained retreats and reactions.

After it had been thus vividly before her for a little that, springing up under her wrong and making them all start, stare and turn pale, she might sound out their doom in a single sentence, a sentence easy to choose among several of the lurid — after she had faced that blinding light and felt it turn to blackness, she rose from her place, laying aside her magazine, and moved slowly round the room, passing near the card-players and pausing an instant behind the chairs in turn. Silent and discreet, she bent a vague mild face upon them, as if to signify that, little as she followed their doings, she wished them well; and she took from each, across the

table, in the common solemnity, an upward recognition which she was to carry away with her on her moving out to the terrace, a few minutes later. Her father and her husband, Mrs. Assingham and Charlotte, had done nothing but meet her eyes; yet the difference in these demonstrations made each a separate passage — which was all the more wonderful since, with the secret behind every face, they had alike tried to look at her THROUGH it and in denial of it.

It all left her, as she wandered off, with the strangest of impressions — the sense, forced upon her as never yet, of an appeal, a positive confidence, from the four pairs of eyes, that was deeper than any negation, and that seemed to speak, on the part of each, of some relation to be contrived by her, a relation with herself, which would spare the individual the danger, the actual present strain, of the relation with the others. They thus tacitly put it upon her to be disposed of, the whole complexity of their peril, and she promptly saw why because she was there, and there just as she was, to lift it off them and take it; to charge herself with it as the scapegoat of old, of whom she had once seen a terrible picture, had been charged with the sins of the people and had gone forth into the desert to sink under his burden and die. That indeed wasn't THEIR design and their interest, that she should sink under hers; it wouldn't be their feeling that she should do anything but live, live on somehow for their benefit, and even as much as possible in their company, to keep proving to them that they had truly escaped and that she was still there to simplify. This idea of her simplifying, and of their combined struggle, dim as yet but steadily growing, toward the perception of her adopting it from them, clung to her while she hovered on the terrace, where the summer night was so soft that she scarce needed the light shawl she had picked up. Several of the long windows of the occupied rooms stood open to it, and the light came out in vague shafts and fell upon the old smooth stones. The hour was moonless and starless and the air heavy and still — which was why, in her evening dress, she need fear no chill and could get away, in the outer darkness, from that provocation of opportunity which had assaulted her, within, on her sofa, as a beast might have leaped at her throat.

Nothing in fact was stranger than the way in which, when she had remained there a little, her companions, watched by her through one of the windows, actually struck her as almost consciously and gratefully safer. They might have been — really charming as they showed in the beautiful room, and Charlotte certainly, as always, magnificently handsome and supremely distinguished — they might have been figures rehearsing some play of which she herself was the author; they might even, for the happy appearance they continued to present, have been such figures as would, by the strong note of character in each, fill any author with the certitude of success, especially of their own histrionic. They might in short have represented any mystery they would; the point being predominantly that the key to the mystery, the key that could wind and unwind it without a snap of the spring, was there in her pocket — or rather, no doubt, clasped at this crisis in her hand and pressed, as she walked back and forth, to her breast. She walked to the end and far out of the light; she returned and saw the others still where she had left them; she passed round the house and looked into the drawing-room, lighted also, but empty now, and seeming to speak the more, in its own voice, of all the possibilities she controlled. Spacious and splendid, like a stage again awaiting a drama, it was a scene she might people, by the press of her spring, either with serenities and dignities and decencies, or with terrors and shames and ruins, things as ugly as those formless fragments of her golden bowl she was trying so hard to pick up.

She continued to walk and continued to pause; she stopped afresh for the look into the smoking-room, and by this time — it was as if the recognition had of itself arrested her — she saw as in a picture, with the temptation she had fled from quite extinct, why it was she had been able to give herself so little, from the first, to the vulgar heat of her wrong. She might fairly, as she watched them, have missed it as a lost thing; have yearned for it, for the straight vindictive view, the rights of resentment, the rages of jealousy, the protests of passion, as for something she had been cheated of not least: a range of feelings which for many women would have meant so much, but which for HER husband's wife, for HER father's daughter, figured nothing nearer to experience than a wild eastern caravan, looming into view with crude colours in the sun, fierce pipes in the air, high spears against the sky, all a thrill, a natural joy to mingle with, but turning off short before it reached her and plunging into other defiles. She saw at all events why horror itself had almost failed her; the horror that, foreshadowed in advance, would, by her thought, have made everything that was unaccustomed in her cry out with pain; the horror of finding evil seated, all at its ease, where she had only dreamed of good; the horror of the thing HIDEOUSLY behind, behind so much trusted, so much pretended, nobleness, cleverness, tenderness. It was the first sharp falsity she had known in her life, to touch at all, or be touched by; it had met

her like some bad-faced stranger surprised in one of the thick-carpeted corridors of a house of quiet on a Sunday afternoon; and yet, yes, amazingly, she had been able to look at terror and disgust only to know that she must put away from her the bitter-sweet of their freshness. The sight, from the window, of the group so constituted, TOLD her why, told her how, named to her, as with hard lips, named straight AT her, so that she must take it full in the face, that other possible relation to the whole fact which alone would bear upon her irresistibly. It was extraordinary: they positively brought home to her that to feel about them in any of the immediate, inevitable, assuaging ways, the ways usually open to innocence outraged and generosity betrayed, would have been to give them up, and that giving them up was, marvellously, not to be thought of. She had never, from the first hour of her state of acquired conviction, given them up so little as now; though she was, no doubt, as the consequence of a step taken a few minutes later, to invoke the conception of doing that, if might be, even less. She had resumed her walk — stopping here and there, while she rested on the cool smooth stone balustrade, to draw it out; in the course of which, after a little, she passed again the lights of the empty drawing-room and paused again for what she saw and felt there.

It was not at once, however, that this became quite concrete; that was the effect of her presently making out that Charlotte was in the room, launched and erect there, in the middle, and looking about her; that she had evidently just come round to it, from her card-table, by one of the passages — with the expectation, to all appearance, of joining her stepdaughter. She had pulled up at seeing the great room empty — Maggie not having passed out, on leaving the group, in a manner to be observed. So definite a quest of her, with the bridge-party interrupted or altered for it, was an impression that fairly assailed the Princess, and to which something of attitude and aspect, of the air of arrested pursuit and purpose, in Charlotte, together with the suggestion of her next vague movements, quickly added its meaning. This meaning was that she had decided, that she had been infinitely conscious of Maggie's presence before, that she knew that she would at last find her alone, and that she wanted her, for some reason, enough to have presumably called on Bob Assingham for aid. He had taken her chair and let her go, and the arrangement was for Maggie a signal proof of her earnestness; of the energy, in fact, that, though superficially commonplace in a situation in which people weren't supposed to be watching each other, was what affected our young woman, on the spot, as a breaking of bars. The splendid shining supple creature was out of the cage, was at large; and the question now almost grotesquely rose of whether she mightn't by some art, just where she was and before she could go further, be hemmed in and secured. It would have been for a moment, in this case, a matter of quickly closing the windows and giving the alarm — with poor Maggie's sense that, though she couldn't know what she wanted of her, it was enough for trepidation that, at these firm hands, anything should be to say nothing of the sequel of a flight taken again along the terrace, even under the shame of the confessed feebleness of such evasions on the part of an outraged wife. It was to this feebleness, none the less, that the outraged wife had presently resorted; the most that could be said for her being, as she felt while she finally stopped short, at a distance, that she could at any rate resist her abjection sufficiently not to sneak into the house by another way and safely reach her room. She had literally caught herself in the act of dodging and ducking, and it told her there, vividly, in a single word, what she had all along been most afraid of.

She had been afraid of the particular passage with Charlotte that would determine her father's wife to take him into her confidence as she couldn't possibly as yet have done, to prepare for him a statement of her wrong, to lay before him the infamy of what she was apparently suspected of. This, should she have made up her mind to do it, would rest on a calculation the thought of which evoked, strangely, other possibilities and visions. It would show her as sufficiently believing in her grasp of her husband to be able to assure herself that, with his daughter thrown on the defensive, with Maggie's cause and Maggie's word, in fine, against her own, it wasn't Maggie's that would most certainly carry the day. Such a glimpse of her conceivable idea, which would be founded on reasons all her own, reasons of experience and assurance, impenetrable to others, but intimately familiar to herself — such a glimpse opened out wide as soon as it had come into view; for if so much as this was still firm ground between the elder pair, if the beauty of appearances had been so consistently preserved, it was only the golden bowl as Maggie herself knew it that had been broken. The breakage stood not for any wrought discomposure among the triumphant three — it stood merely for the dire deformity of her attitude toward them. She was unable at the minute, of course, fully to measure the difference thus involved for her, and it remained inevitably an agitating image, the way it might be held over her that if she didn't, of her own prudence, satisfy Charlotte as to the reference, in her mocking spirit, of so much of the unuttered and unutterable, of the constantly and unmistakably implied, her father would be

invited without further ceremony to recommend her to do so. But ANY confidence, ANY latent operating insolence, that Mrs. Verver should, thanks to her large native resources, continue to be possessed of and to hold in reserve, glimmered suddenly as a possible working light and seemed to offer, for meeting her, a new basis and something like a new system. Maggie felt, truly, a rare contraction of the heart on making out, the next instant, what the new system would probably have to be — and she had practically done that before perceiving that the thing she feared had already taken place. Charlotte, extending her search, appeared now to define herself vaguely in the distance; of this, after an instant, the Princess was sure, though the darkness was thick, for the projected clearness of the smoking-room windows had presently contributed its help. Her friend came slowly into that circle — having also, for herself, by this time, not indistinguishably discovered that Maggie was on the terrace. Maggie, from the end, saw her stop before one of the windows to look at the group within, and then saw her come nearer and pause again, still with a considerable length of the place between them.

Yes, Charlotte had seen she was watching her from afar, and had stopped now to put her further attention to the test. Her face was fixed on her, through the night; she was the creature who had escaped by force from her cage, yet there was in her whole motion assuredly, even as so dimly discerned, a kind of portentous intelligent stillness. She had escaped with an intention, but with an intention the more definite that it could so accord with quiet measures. The two women, at all events, only hovered there, for these first minutes, face to face over their interval and exchanging no sign; the intensity of their mutual look might have pierced the night, and Maggie was at last to start with the scared sense of having thus yielded to doubt, to dread, to hesitation, for a time that, with no other proof needed, would have completely given her away. How long had she stood staring? — a single minute or five? Long enough, in any case, to have felt herself absolutely take from her visitor something that the latter threw upon her, irresistibly, by this effect of silence, by this effect of waiting and watching, by this effect, unmistakably, of timing her indecision and her fear. If then, scared and hanging back, she had, as was so evident, sacrificed all past pretences, it would have been with the instant knowledge of an immense advantage gained that Charlotte finally saw her come on. Maggie came on with her heart in her hands; she came on with the definite prevision, throbbing like the tick of a watch, of a doom impossibly sharp and hard, but to which, after looking at it with her eyes wide open, she had none the less bowed her head. By the time she was at her companion's side, for that matter, by the time Charlotte had, without a motion, without a word, simply let her approach and stand there, her head was already on the block, so that the consciousness that everything had now gone blurred all perception of whether or no the axe had fallen. Oh, the "advantage," it was perfectly enough, in truth, with Mrs. Verver; for what was Maggie's own sense but that of having been thrown over on her back, with her neck, from the first, half broken and her helpless face staring up? That position only could account for the positive grimace of weakness and pain produced there by Charlotte's dignity.

"I've come to join you — I thought you would be here."

"Oh yes, I'm here," Maggie heard herself return a little flatly. "It's too close in-doors."

"Very — but close even here." Charlotte was still and grave — she had even uttered her remark about the temperature with an expressive weight that verged upon solemnity; so that Maggie, reduced to looking vaguely about at the sky, could only feel her not fail of her purpose. "The air's heavy as if with thunder — I think there'll be a storm." She made the suggestion to carry off an awkwardness — which was a part, always, of her companion's gain; but the awkwardness didn't diminish in the silence that followed. Charlotte had said nothing in reply; her brow was dark as with a fixed expression, and her high elegance, her handsome head and long, straight neck testified, through the dusk, to their inveterate completeness and noble erectness. It was as if what she had come out to do had already begun, and when, as a consequence, Maggie had said helplessly, "Don't you want something? won't you have my shawl?" everything might have crumbled away in the comparative poverty of the tribute. Mrs. Verver's rejection of it had the brevity of a sign that they hadn't closed in for idle words, just as her dim, serious face, uninterruptedly presented until they moved again, might have represented the success with which she watched all her message penetrate. They presently went back the way she had come, but she stopped Maggie again within range of the smoking-room window and made her stand where the party at cards would be before her. Side by side, for three minutes, they fixed this picture of quiet harmonies, the positive charm of it and, as might have been said, the full significance — which, as was now brought home to Maggie, could be no more, after all, than a matter of interpretation, differing always for a different interpreter. As she herself had hovered in sight of it a quarter-of-an-hour before, it would have

been a thing for her to show Charlotte — to show in righteous irony, in reproach too stern for anything but silence. But now it was she who was being shown it, and shown it by Charlotte, and she saw quickly enough that, as Charlotte showed it, so she must at present submissively seem to take it.

The others were absorbed and unconscious, either silent over their game or dropping remarks unheard on the terrace; and it was to her father's quiet face, discernibly expressive of nothing that was in his daughter's mind, that our young woman's attention was most directly given. His wife and his daughter were both closely watching him, and to which of them, could he have been notified of this, would his raised eyes first, all impulsively, have responded; in which of them would he have felt it most important to destroy — for HIS clutch at the equilibrium — any germ of uneasiness? Not yet, since his marriage, had Maggie so sharply and so formidably known her old possession of him as a thing divided and contested. She was looking at him by Charlotte's leave and under Charlotte's direction; quite in fact as if the particular way she should look at him were prescribed to her; quite, even, as if she had been defied to look at him in any other. It came home to her too that the challenge wasn't, as might be said, in his interest and for his protection, but, pressingly, insistently, in Charlotte's, for that of HER security at any price. She might verily, by this dumb demonstration, have been naming to Maggie the price, naming it as a question for Maggie herself, a sum of money that she, properly, was to find. She must remain safe and Maggie must pay — what she was to pay with being her own affair.

Straighter than ever, thus, the Princess again felt it all put upon her, and there was a minute, just a supreme instant, during which there burned in her a wild wish that her father would only look up. It throbbed for these seconds as a yearning appeal to him — she would chance it, that is, if he would but just raise his eyes and catch them, across the larger space, standing in the outer dark together. Then he might be affected by the sight, taking them as they were; he might make some sign — she scarce knew what — that would save her; save her from being the one, this way, to pay all. He might somehow show a preference — distinguishing between them; might, out of pity for her, signal to her that this extremity of her effort for him was more than he asked. That represented Maggie's one little lapse from consistency — the sole small deflection in the whole course of her scheme. It had come to nothing the next minute, for the dear man's eyes had never moved, and Charlotte's hand, promptly passed into her arm, had already, had very firmly drawn her on — quite, for that matter, as from some sudden, some equal perception on her part too of the more ways than one in which their impression could appeal. They retraced their steps along the rest of the terrace, turning the corner of the house, and presently came abreast of the other windows, those of the pompous drawing-room, still lighted and still empty. Here Charlotte again paused, and it was again as if she were pointing out what Maggie had observed for herself, the very look the place had of being vivid in its stillness, of having, with all its great objects as ordered and balanced as for a formal reception, been appointed for some high transaction, some real affair of state. In presence of this opportunity she faced her companion once more; she traced in her the effect of everything she had already communicated; she signified, with the same success, that the terrace and the sullen night would bear too meagre witness to the completion of her idea. Soon enough then, within the room, under the old lustres of Venice and the eyes of the several great portraits, more or less contemporary with these, that awaited on the walls of Fawns their final far migration — soon enough Maggie found herself staring, and at first all too gaspingly, at the grand total to which each separate demand Mrs. Verver had hitherto made upon her, however she had made it, now amounted.

"I've been wanting — and longer than you'd perhaps believe — to put a question to you for which no opportunity has seemed to me yet quite so good as this. It would have been easier perhaps if you had struck me as in the least disposed ever to give me one. I have to take it now, you see, as I find it." They stood in the centre of the immense room, and Maggie could feel that the scene of life her imagination had made of it twenty minutes before was by this time sufficiently peopled. These few straight words filled it to its uttermost reaches, and nothing was now absent from her consciousness, either, of the part she was called upon to play in it. Charlotte had marched straight in, dragging her rich train; she rose there beautiful and free, with her whole aspect and action attuned to the firmness of her speech. Maggie had kept the shawl she had taken out with her, and, clutching it tight in her nervousness, drew it round her as if huddling in it for shelter, covering herself with it for humility. She looked out as from under an improvised hood — the sole headgear of some poor woman at somebody's proud door; she waited even like the poor woman; she met her friend's eyes with recognitions she couldn't suppress. She might sound it as she could— "What question then?" — everything in her, from head to foot, crowded it upon Charlotte that she knew. She knew too well — that she was

showing; so that successful vagueness, to save some scrap of her dignity from the imminence of her defeat, was already a lost cause, and the one thing left was if possible, at any cost, even that of stupid inconsequence, to try to look as if she weren't afraid. If she could but appear at all not afraid she might appear a little not ashamed — that is not ashamed to be afraid, which was the kind of shame that could be fastened on her, it being fear all the while that moved her. Her challenge, at any rate, her wonder, her terror — the blank, blurred surface, whatever it was that she presented became a mixture that ceased to signify; for to the accumulated advantage by which Charlotte was at present sustained her next words themselves had little to add.

"Have you any ground of complaint of me? Is there any wrong you consider I've done you? I feel at last that I've a right to ask you."

Their eyes had to meet on it, and to meet long; Maggie's avoided at least the disgrace of looking away. "What makes you want to ask it?"

"My natural desire to know. You've done that, for so long, little justice."

Maggie waited a moment. "For so long? You mean you've thought — ?"

"I mean, my dear, that I've seen. I've seen, week after week, that YOU seemed to be thinking — of something that perplexed or worried you. Is it anything for which I'm in any degree responsible?"

Maggie summoned all her powers. "What in the world SHOULD it be?"

"Ah, that's not for me to imagine, and I should be very sorry to have to try to say! I'm aware of no point whatever at which I may have failed you," said Charlotte; "nor of any at which I may have failed any one in whom I can suppose you sufficiently interested to care. If I've been guilty of some fault I've committed it all unconsciously, and am only anxious to hear from you honestly about it. But if I've been mistaken as to what I speak of — the difference, more and more marked, as I've thought, in all your manner to me — why, obviously, so much the better. No form of correction received from you could give me greater satisfaction."

She spoke, it struck her companion, with rising, with extraordinary ease; as if hearing herself say it all, besides seeing the way it was listened to, helped her from point to point. She saw she was right — that this WAS the tone for her to take and the thing for her to do, the thing as to which she was probably feeling that she had in advance, in her delays and uncertainties, much exaggerated the difficulty. The difficulty was small, and it grew smaller as her adversary continued to shrink; she was not only doing as she wanted, but had by this time effectively done it and hung it up. All of which but deepened Maggie's sense of the sharp and simple need, now, of seeing her through to the end. "'If' you've been mistaken, you say?" — and the Princess but barely faltered. "You HAVE been mistaken."

Charlotte looked at her splendidly hard. "You're perfectly sure it's ALL my mistake?"

"All I can say is that you've received a false impression."

"Ah then — so much the better! From the moment I HAD received it I knew I must sooner or later speak of it — for that, you see, is, systematically, my way. And now," Charlotte added, "you make me glad I've spoken. I thank you very much."

It was strange how for Maggie too, with this, the difficulty seemed to sink. Her companion's acceptance of her denial was like a general pledge not to keep things any worse for her than they essentially had to be; it positively helped her to build up her falsehood — to which, accordingly, she contributed another block. "I've affected you evidently — quite accidentally — in some way of which I've been all unaware. I've NOT felt at any time that you've wronged me."

"How could I come within a mile," Charlotte inquired, "of such a possibility?"

Maggie, with her eyes on her more easily now, made no attempt to say; she said, after a little, something more to the present point. "I accuse you — I accuse you of nothing."

"Ah, that's lucky!"

Charlotte had brought this out with the richness, almost, of gaiety; and Maggie, to go on, had to think, with her own intensity, of Amerigo — to think how he, on his side, had had to go through with his lie to her, how it was for his wife he had done so, and how his doing so had given her the clue and set her the example. He must have had his own difficulty about it, and she was not, after all, falling below him. It was in fact as if, thanks to her hovering image of him confronted with this admirable creature even as she was confronted, there glowed upon her from afar, yet straight and strong, a deep explanatory light which covered the last inch of the ground. He had given her something to conform to, and she hadn't unintelligently turned on him, "gone back on" him, as he would have said, by not conforming. They were together thus, he and she, close, close together — whereas Charlotte, though rising there radiantly before her, was really off in some darkness of

space that would steep her in solitude and harass her with care. The heart of the Princess swelled, accordingly, even in her abasement; she had kept in tune with the right, and something, certainly, something that might be like a rare flower snatched from an impossible ledge, would, and possibly soon, come of it for her. The right, the right — yes, it took this extraordinary form of her humbugging, as she had called it, to the end. It was only a question of not, by a hair's breadth, deflecting into the truth. So, supremely, was she braced. "You must take it from me that your anxiety rests quite on a misconception. You must take it from me that I've never at any moment fancied I could suffer by you." And, marvellously, she kept it up — not only kept it up, but improved on it. "You must take it from me that I've never thought of you but as beautiful, wonderful and good. Which is all, I think, that you can possibly ask."

Charlotte held her a moment longer: she needed — not then to have appeared only tactless — the last word. "It's much more, my dear, than I dreamed of asking. I only wanted your denial."

"Well then, you have it."

"Upon your honour?"

"Upon my honour:"

And she made a point even, our young woman, of not turning away. Her grip of her shawl had loosened — she had let it fall behind her; but she stood there for anything more and till the weight should be lifted. With which she saw soon enough what more was to come. She saw it in Charlotte's face, and felt it make between them, in the air, a chill that completed the coldness of their conscious perjury. "Will you kiss me on it then?"

She couldn't say yes, but she didn't say no; what availed her still, however, was to measure, in her passivity, how much too far Charlotte had come to retreat. But there was something different also, something for which, while her cheek received the prodigious kiss, she had her opportunity — the sight of the others, who, having risen from their cards to join the absent members of their party, had reached the open door at the end of the room and stopped short, evidently, in presence of the demonstration that awaited them. Her husband and her father were in front, and Charlotte's embrace of her — which wasn't to be distinguished, for them, either, she felt, from her embrace of Charlotte — took on with their arrival a high publicity.

XXXVII

Her father had asked her, three days later, in an interval of calm, how she was affected, in the light of their reappearance and of their now perhaps richer fruition, by Dotty and Kitty, and by the once formidable Mrs. Rance; and the consequence of this inquiry had been, for the pair, just such another stroll together, away from the rest of the party and off into the park, as had asserted its need to them on the occasion of the previous visit of these anciently more agitating friends — that of their long talk, on a sequestered bench beneath one of the great trees, when the particular question had come up for them the then purblind discussion of which, at their enjoyed leisure, Maggie had formed the habit of regarding as the "first beginning" of their present situation. The whirligig of time had thus brought round for them again, on their finding themselves face to face while the others were gathering for tea on the terrace, the same odd impulse quietly to "slope" — so Adam Verver himself, as they went, familiarly expressed it — that had acted, in its way, of old; acted for the distant autumn afternoon and for the sharpness of their since so outlived crisis. It might have been funny to them now that the presence of Mrs. Rance and the Lutches — and with symptoms, too, at that time less developed — had once, for their anxiety and their prudence, constituted a crisis; it might have been funny that these ladies could ever have figured, to their imagination, as a symbol of dangers vivid enough to precipitate the need of a remedy. This amount of entertainment and assistance they were indeed disposed to extract from their actual impressions; they had been finding it, for months past, by Maggie's view, a resource and a relief to talk, with an approach to intensity, when they met, of all the people they weren't really thinking of and didn't really care about, the people with whom their existence had begun almost to swarm; and they closed in at present round the spectres of their past, as they permitted themselves to describe the three ladies, with a better imitation of enjoying their theme than they had been able to achieve, certainly, during the stay, for instance, of the Castledeans. The Castledeans were a new joke, comparatively, and they had had — always to Maggie's view — to teach themselves the way of it; whereas the Detroit, the Providence party, rebounding so from Providence, from Detroit, was an old and ample one, of which the most could be made and as to which a humorous insistence could be guarded.

Sharp and sudden, moreover, this afternoon, had been their well-nigh confessed desire just to rest together, a little, as from some strain long felt but never named; to rest, as who should say, shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand, each pair of eyes so yearningly — and indeed what could it be but so wearily? — closed as to render the collapse safe from detection by the other pair. It was positively as if, in short, the inward felicity of their being once more, perhaps only for half-an-hour, simply daughter and father had glimmered out for them, and they had picked up the pretext that would make it easiest. They were husband and wife — oh, so immensely! — as regards other persons; but after they had dropped again on their old bench, conscious that the party on the terrace, augmented, as in the past, by neighbours, would do beautifully without them, it was wonderfully like their having got together into some boat and paddled off from the shore where husbands and wives, luxuriant complications, made the air too tropical. In the boat they were father and daughter, and poor Dotty and Kitty supplied abundantly, for their situation, the oars or the sail. Why, into the bargain, for that matter — this came to Maggie — couldn't they always live, so far as they lived together, in a boat? She felt in her face, with the question, the breath of a possibility that soothed her; they needed only KNOW each other, henceforth, in the unmarried relation. That other sweet evening, in the same place, he had been as unmarried as possible — which had kept down, so to speak, the quantity of change in their state. Well then, that other sweet evening was what the present sweet evening would resemble; with the quite calculable effect of an exquisite inward refreshment. They HAD, after all, whatever happened, always and ever each other; each other — that was the hidden treasure and the saving truth — to do exactly what they would with: a provision full of possibilities. Who could tell, as yet, what, thanks to it, they wouldn't have done before the end?

They had meanwhile been tracing together, in the golden air that, toward six o'clock of a July afternoon, hung about the massed Kentish woods, several features of the social evolution of her old playmates, still beckoned on, it would seem, by unattainable ideals, still falling back, beyond the sea, to their native seats, for renewals of the moral, financial, conversational — one scarce knew what to call it — outfit, and again and for ever reappearing like a tribe of Wandering Jewesses. Our couple had finally exhausted, however, the study of these annals, and Maggie was to take up, after a drop, a different matter, or one at least with which the immediate connection was not at first apparent. "Were you amused at me just now — when I wondered what

other people could wish to struggle for? Did you think me," she asked with some earnestness— "well, fatuous?"

"'Fatuous'?" — he seemed at a loss.

"I mean sublime in OUR happiness — as if looking down from a height. Or, rather, sublime in our general position — that's what I mean." She spoke as from the habit of her anxious conscience something that disposed her frequently to assure herself, for her human commerce, of the state of the "books" of the spirit. "Because I don't at all want," she explained, "to be blinded, or made 'sniffy,' by any sense of a social situation." Her father listened to this declaration as if the precautions of her general mercy could still, as they betrayed themselves, have surprises for him — to say nothing of a charm of delicacy and beauty; he might have been wishing to see how far she could go and where she would, all touchingly to him, arrive. But she waited a little — as if made nervous, precisely, by feeling him depend too much on what she said. They were avoiding the serious, standing off, anxiously, from the real, and they fell, again and again, as if to disguise their precaution itself, into the tone of the time that came back to them from their other talk, when they had shared together this same refuge. "Don't you remember," she went on, "how, when they were here before, I broke it to you that I wasn't so very sure we, ourselves had the thing itself?"

He did his best to do so. "Had, you mean a social situation?"

"Yes — after Fanny Assingham had first broken it to me that, at the rate we were going, we should never have one."

"Which was what put us on Charlotte?" Oh yes, they had had it over quite often enough for him easily to remember.

Maggie had another pause — taking it from him that he now could both affirm and admit without wincing that they had been, at their critical moment, "put on" Charlotte. It was as if this recognition had been threshed out between them as fundamental to the honest view of their success. "Well," she continued, "I recall how I felt, about Kitty and Dotty, that even if we had already then been more 'placed,' or whatever you may call what we are now, it still wouldn't have been an excuse for wondering why others couldn't obligingly leave me more exalted by having, themselves, smaller ideas. For those," she said, "were the feelings we used to have."

"Oh yes," he responded philosophically— "I remember the feelings we used to have."

Maggie appeared to wish to plead for them a little, in tender retrospect — as if they had been also respectable. "It was bad enough, I thought, to have no sympathy in your heart when you HAD a position. But it was worse to be sublime about it — as I was so afraid, as I'm in fact still afraid of being — when it wasn't even there to support one." And she put forth again the earnestness she might have been taking herself as having outlived; became for it — which was doubtless too often even now her danger — almost sententious. "One must always, whether or no, have some imagination of the states of others — of what they may feel deprived of. However," she added, "Kitty and Dotty couldn't imagine we were deprived of anything. And now, and now — !" But she stopped as for indulgence to their wonder and envy.

"And now they see, still more, that we can have got everything, and kept everything, and yet not be proud."

"No, we're not proud," she answered after a moment. "I'm not sure that we're quite proud enough." Yet she changed the next instant that subject too. She could only do so, however, by harking back — as if it had been a fascination. She might have been wishing, under this renewed, this still more suggestive visitation, to keep him with her for remounting the stream of time and dipping again, for the softness of the water, into the contracted basin of the past. "We talked about it — we talked about it; you don't remember so well as I. You too didn't know — and it was beautiful of you; like Kitty and Dotty you too thought we had a position, and were surprised when *I* thought we ought to have told them we weren't doing for them what they supposed. In fact," Maggie pursued, "we're not doing it now. We're not, you see, really introducing them. I mean not to the people they want."

"Then what do you call the people with whom they're now having tea?"

It made her quite spring round. "That's just what you asked me the other time — one of the days there was somebody. And I told you I didn't call anybody anything."

"I remember — that such people, the people we made so welcome, didn't 'count'; that Fanny Assingham knew they didn't." She had awakened, his daughter, the echo; and on the bench there, as before, he nodded his head amusedly, he kept nervously shaking his foot. "Yes, they were only good enough — the people who

came — for US. I remember," he said again: "that was the way it all happened."

"That was the way — that was the way. And you asked me," Maggie added, "if I didn't think we ought to tell them. Tell Mrs. Rance, in particular, I mean, that we had been entertaining her up to then under false pretences."

"Precisely — but you said she wouldn't have understood."

"To which you replied that in that case you were like her. YOU didn't understand."

"No, no — but I remember how, about our having, in our benighted innocence, no position, you quite crushed me with your explanation."

"Well then," said Maggie with every appearance of delight, "I'll crush you again. I told you that you by yourself had one — there was no doubt of that. You were different from me — you had the same one you always had."

"And THEN I asked you," her father concurred, "why in that case you hadn't the same."

"Then indeed you did." He had brought her face round to him before, and this held it, covering him with its kindled brightness, the result of the attested truth of their being able thus, in talk, to live again together. "What I replied was that I had lost my position by my marriage. THAT one — I know how I saw it — would never come back. I had done something TO it — I didn't quite know what; given it away, somehow, and yet not, as then appeared, really got my return. I had been assured — always by dear Fanny — that I COULD get it, only I must wake up. So I was trying, you see, to wake up — trying very hard."

"Yes — and to a certain extent you succeeded; as also in waking me. But you made much," he said, "of your difficulty." To which he added: "It's the only case I remember, Mag, of you ever making ANYTHING of a difficulty."

She kept her eyes on him a moment. "That I was so happy as I was?"

"That you were so happy as you were."

"Well, you admitted" — Maggie kept it up— "that that was a good difficulty. You confessed that our life did seem to be beautiful."

He thought a moment. "Yes — I may very well have confessed it, for so it did seem to me." But he guarded himself with his dim, his easier smile. "What do you want to put on me now?"

"Only that we used to wonder — that we were wondering then — if our life wasn't perhaps a little selfish." This also for a time, much at his leisure, Adam Verver retrospectively fixed. "Because Fanny Assingham thought so?"

"Oh no; she never thought, she couldn't think, if she would, anything of that sort. She only thinks people are sometimes fools," Maggie developed; "she doesn't seem to think so much about their being wrong — wrong, that is, in the sense of being wicked. She doesn't," the Princess further adventured, "quite so much mind their being wicked."

"I see — I see." And yet it might have been for his daughter that he didn't so very vividly see. "Then she only thought US fools?"

"Oh no — I don't say that. I'm speaking of our being selfish."

"And that comes under the head of the wickedness Fanny condones?"

"Oh, I don't say she CONDONES — !" A scruple in Maggie raised its crest. "Besides, I'm speaking of what was."

Her father showed, however, after a little, that he had not been reached by this discrimination; his thoughts were resting for the moment where they had settled. "Look here, Mag," he said reflectively— "I ain't selfish. I'll be blowed if I'm selfish."

Well, Maggie, if he WOULD talk of that, could also pronounce. "Then, father, *I* am."

"Oh shucks!" said Adam Verver, to whom the vernacular, in moments of deepest sincerity, could thus come back. "I'll believe it," he presently added, "when Amerigo complains of you."

"Ah, it's just he who's my selfishness. I'm selfish, so to speak, FOR him. I mean," she continued, "that he's my motive — in everything."

Well, her father could, from experience, fancy what she meant. "But hasn't a girl a right to be selfish about her husband?"

"What I DON'T mean," she observed without answering, "is that I'm jealous of him. But that's his merit — it's not mine."

Her father again seemed amused at her. "You COULD be — otherwise?"

“Oh, how can I talk,” she asked, “of otherwise? It ISN’T, luckily for me, otherwise. If everything were different” — she further presented her thought— “of course everything WOULD be.” And then again, as if that were but half: “My idea is this, that when you only love a little you’re naturally not jealous — or are only jealous also a little, so that it doesn’t matter. But when you love in a deeper and intenser way, then you are, in the same proportion, jealous; your jealousy has intensity and, no doubt, ferocity. When, however, you love in the most abysmal and unutterable way of all — why then you’re beyond everything, and nothing can pull you down.”

Mr. Verver listened as if he had nothing, on these high lines, to oppose. “And that’s the way YOU love?”

For a minute she failed to speak, but at last she answered: “It wasn’t to talk about that. I do FEEL, however, beyond everything — and as a consequence of that, I dare say,” she added with a turn to gaiety, “seem often not to know quite WHERE I am.”

The mere fine pulse of passion in it, the suggestion as of a creature consciously floating and shining in a warm summer sea, some element of dazzling sapphire and silver, a creature cradled upon depths, buoyant among dangers, in which fear or folly, or sinking otherwise than in play, was impossible — something of all this might have been making once more present to him, with his discreet, his half shy assent to it, her probable enjoyment of a rapture that he, in his day, had presumably convinced no great number of persons either of his giving or of his receiving. He sat awhile as if he knew himself hushed, almost admonished, and not for the first time; yet it was an effect that might have brought before him rather what she had gained than what he had missed.

Besides, who but himself really knew what he, after all, hadn’t, or even had, gained? The beauty of her condition was keeping him, at any rate, as he might feel, in sight of the sea, where, though his personal dips were over, the whole thing could shine at him, and the air and the plash and the play become for him too a sensation. That couldn’t be fixed upon him as missing; since if it wasn’t personally floating, if it wasn’t even sitting in the sand, it could yet pass very well for breathing the bliss, in a communicated irresistible way — for tasting the balm. It could pass, further, for knowing — for knowing that without him nothing might have been: which would have been missing least of all.

“I guess I’ve never been jealous,” he finally remarked. And it said more to her, he had occasion next to perceive, than he was intending; for it made her, as by the pressure of a spring, give him a look that seemed to tell of things she couldn’t speak.

But she at last tried for one of them. “Oh, it’s you, father, who are what I call beyond everything. Nothing can pull YOU down.”

He returned the look as with the sociability of their easy communion, though inevitably throwing in this time a shade of solemnity. He might have been seeing things to say, and others, whether of a type presumptuous or not, doubtless better kept back. So he settled on the merely obvious. “Well then, we make a pair. We’re all right.”

“Oh, we’re all right!” A declaration launched not only with all her discriminating emphasis, but confirmed by her rising with decision and standing there as if the object of their small excursion required accordingly no further pursuit. At this juncture, however — with the act of their crossing the bar, to get, as might be, into port — there occurred the only approach to a betrayal of their having had to beat against the wind. Her father kept his place, and it was as if she had got over first and were pausing for her consort to follow. If they were all right; they were all right; yet he seemed to hesitate and wait for some word beyond. His eyes met her own, suggestively, and it was only after she had contented herself with simply smiling at him, smiling ever so fixedly, that he spoke, for the remaining importance of it, from the bench; where he leaned back, raising his face to her, his legs thrust out a trifle wearily and his hands grasping either side of the seat. They had beaten against the wind, and she was still fresh; they had beaten against the wind, and he, as at the best the more battered vessel, perhaps just vaguely drooped. But the effect of their silence was that she appeared to beckon him on, and he might have been fairly alongside of her when, at the end of another minute, he found their word. “The only thing is that, as for ever putting up again with your pretending that you’re selfish — !”

At this she helped him out with it. “You won’t take it from me?”

“I won’t take it from you.”

“Well, of course you won’t, for that’s your way. It doesn’t matter, and it only proves — ! But it doesn’t matter, either, what it proves. I’m at this very moment,” she declared, “frozen stiff with selfishness.”

He faced her awhile longer in the same way; it was, strangely, as if, by this sudden arrest, by their having,

in their acceptance of the unsaid, or at least their reference to it, practically given up pretending — it was as if they were "in" for it, for something they had been ineffably avoiding, but the dread of which was itself, in a manner, a seduction, just as any confession of the dread was by so much an allusion. Then she seemed to see him let himself go. "When a person's of the nature you speak of there are always other persons to suffer. But you've just been describing to me what you'd take, if you had once a good chance, from your husband."

"Oh, I'm not talking about my husband!"

"Then whom, ARE you talking about?"

Both the retort and the rejoinder had come quicker than anything previously exchanged, and they were followed, on Maggie's part, by a momentary drop. But she was not to fall away, and while her companion kept his eyes on her, while she wondered if he weren't expecting her to name his wife then, with high hypocrisy, as paying for his daughter's bliss, she produced something that she felt to be much better. "I'm talking about YOU."

"Do you mean I've been your victim?"

"Of course you've been my victim. What have you done, ever done, that hasn't been FOR me?"

"Many things; more than I can tell you — things you've only to think of for yourself. What do you make of all that I've done for myself?"

"'Yourself'?—" She brightened out with derision.

"What do you make of what I've done for American City?"

It took her but a moment to say. "I'm not talking of you as a public character — I'm talking of you on your personal side."

"Well, American City — if 'personalities' can do it — has given me a pretty personal side. What do you make," he went on, "of what I've done for my reputation?"

"Your reputation THERE? You've given it up to them, the awful people, for less than nothing; you've given it up to them to tear to pieces, to make their horrible vulgar jokes against you with."

"Ah, my dear, I don't care for their horrible vulgar jokes," Adam Verver almost artlessly urged.

"Then there, exactly, you are!" she triumphed. "Everything that touches you, everything that surrounds you, goes on — by your splendid indifference and your incredible permission — at your expense."

Just as he had been sitting he looked at her an instant longer; then he slowly rose, while his hands stole into his pockets, and stood there before her. "Of course, my dear, YOU go on at my expense: it has never been my idea," he smiled, "that you should work for your living. I wouldn't have liked to see it." With which, for a little again, they remained face to face. "Say therefore I HAVE had the feelings of a father. How have they made me a victim?"

"Because I sacrifice you."

"But to what in the world?"

At this it hung before her that she should have had as never yet her opportunity to say, and it held her for a minute as in a vise, her impression of his now, with his strained smile, which touched her to deepest depths, sounding her in his secret unrest. This was the moment, in the whole process of their mutual vigilance, in which it decidedly most hung by a hair that their thin wall might be pierced by the lightest wrong touch. It shook between them, this transparency, with their very breath; it was an exquisite tissue, but stretched on a frame, and would give way the next instant if either so much as breathed too hard. She held her breath, for she knew by his eyes, the light at the heart of which he couldn't blind, that he was, by his intention, making sure — sure whether or no her certainty was like his. The intensity of his dependence on it at that moment — this itself was what absolutely convinced her so that, as if perched up before him on her vertiginous point and in the very glare of his observation, she balanced for thirty seconds, she almost rocked: she might have been for the time, in all her conscious person, the very form of the equilibrium they were, in their different ways, equally trying to save. And they were saving it — yes, they were, or at least she was: that was still the workable issue, she could say, as she felt her dizziness drop. She held herself hard; the thing was to be done, once for all, by her acting, now, where she stood. So much was crowded into so short a space that she knew already she was keeping her head. She had kept it by the warning of his eyes; she shouldn't lose it again; she knew how and why, and if she had turned cold this was precisely what helped her. He had said to himself "She'll break down and name Amerigo; she'll say it's to him she's sacrificing me; and its by what that will give me — with so many other things too — that my suspicion will be clinched." He was watching her lips, spying for the symptoms of the sound; whereby these symptoms had only to fail and he would have got

nothing that she didn't measure out to him as she gave it. She had presently in fact so recovered herself that she seemed to know she could more easily have made him name his wife than he have made her name her husband. It was there before her that if she should so much as force him just NOT consciously to avoid saying "Charlotte, Charlotte" he would have given himself away. But to be sure of this was enough for her, and she saw more clearly with each lapsing instant what they were both doing. He was doing what he had steadily been coming to; he was practically OFFERING himself, pressing himself upon her, as a sacrifice — he had read his way so into her best possibility; and where had she already, for weeks and days past, planted her feet if not on her acceptance of the offer? Cold indeed, colder and colder she turned, as she felt herself suffer this close personal vision of his attitude still not to make her weaken. That was her very certitude, the intensity of his pressure; for if something dreadful hadn't happened there wouldn't, for either of them, be these dreadful things to do. She had meanwhile, as well, the immense advantage that she could have named Charlotte without exposing herself — as, for that matter, she was the next minute showing him.

"Why, I sacrifice you, simply, to everything and to every one. I take the consequences of your marriage as perfectly natural."

He threw back his head a little, settling with one hand his eyeglass. "What do you call, my dear, the consequences?"

"Your life as your marriage has made it."

"Well, hasn't it made it exactly what we wanted?" She just hesitated, then felt herself steady — oh, beyond what she had dreamed. "Exactly what *I* wanted — yes."

His eyes, through his straightened glasses, were still on hers, and he might, with his intenser fixed smile, have been knowing she was, for herself, rightly inspired. "What do you make then of what I wanted?"

"I don't make anything, any more than of what you've got. That's exactly the point. I don't put myself out to do so — I never have; I take from you all I can get, all you've provided for me, and I leave you to make of your own side of the matter what you can. There you are — the rest is your own affair. I don't even pretend to concern myself — !"

"To concern yourself — ?" He watched her as she faintly faltered, looking about her now so as not to keep always meeting his face.

"With what may have REALLY become of you. It's as if we had agreed from the first not to go into that — such an arrangement being of course charming for ME. You can't say, you know, that I haven't stuck to it."

He didn't say so then — even with the opportunity given him of her stopping once more to catch her breath. He said instead: "Oh, my dear — oh, oh!"

But it made no difference, know as she might what a past — still so recent and yet so distant — it alluded to; she repeated her denial, warning him off, on her side, from spoiling the truth of her contention. "I never went into anything, and you see I don't; I've continued to adore you — but what's that, from a decent daughter to such a father? what but a question of convenient arrangement, our having two houses, three houses, instead of one (you would have arranged for fifty if I had wished!) and my making it easy for you to see the child? You don't claim, I suppose, that my natural course, once you had set up for yourself, would have been to ship you back to American City?"

These were direct inquiries, they quite rang out, in the soft, wooded air; so that Adam Verver, for a minute, appeared to meet them with reflection. She saw reflection, however, quickly enough show him what to do with them. "Do you know, Mag, what you make me wish when you talk that way?" And he waited again, while she further got from him the sense of something that had been behind, deeply in the shade, coming cautiously to the front and just feeling its way before presenting itself. "You regularly make me wish that I had shipped back to American City. When you go on as you do—" But he really had to hold himself to say it.

"Well, when I go on — ?"

"Why, you make me quite want to ship back myself. You make me quite feel as if American City would be the best place for us."

It made her all too finely vibrate. "For 'us' — ?"

"For me and Charlotte. Do you know that if we should ship, it would serve you quite right?" With which he smiled — oh he smiled! "And if you say much more we WILL ship."

Ah, then it was that the cup of her conviction, full to the brim, overflowed at a touch! THERE was his idea, the clearness of which for an instant almost dazzled her. It was a blur of light, in the midst of which she saw

Charlotte like some object marked, by contrast, in blackness, saw her waver in the field of vision, saw her removed, transported, doomed. And he had named Charlotte, named her again, and she had MADE him — which was all she had needed more: it was as if she had held a blank letter to the fire and the writing had come out still larger than she hoped. The recognition of it took her some seconds, but she might when she spoke have been folding up these precious lines and restoring them to her pocket. "Well, I shall be as much as ever then the cause of what you do. I haven't the least doubt of your being up to that if you should think I might get anything out of it; even the little pleasure," she laughed, "of having said, as you call it, 'more.' Let my enjoyment of this therefore, at any price, continue to represent for you what *I* call sacrificing you."

She had drawn a long breath; she had made him do it ALL for her, and had lighted the way to it without his naming her husband. That silence had been as distinct as the sharp, the inevitable sound, and something now, in him, followed it up, a sudden air as of confessing at last fully to where she was and of begging the particular question. "Don't you think then I can take care of myself?"

"Ah, it's exactly what I've gone upon. If it wasn't for that — !"

But she broke off, and they remained only another moment face to face. "I'll let you know, my dear, the day *I* feel you've begun to sacrifice me."

"'Begun'?" she extravagantly echoed.

"Well, it will be, for me, the day you've ceased to believe in me."

With which, his glasses still fixed on her, his hands in his pockets, his hat pushed back, his legs a little apart, he seemed to plant or to square himself for a kind of assurance it had occurred to him he might as well treat her to, in default of other things, before they changed their subject. It had the effect, for her, of a reminder — a reminder of all he was, of all he had done, of all, above and beyond his being her perfect little father, she might take him as representing, take him as having, quite eminently, in the eyes of two hemispheres, been capable of, and as therefore wishing, not — was it? — illegitimately, to call her attention to. The "successful," beneficent person, the beautiful, bountiful, original, dauntlessly wilful great citizen, the consummate collector and infallible high authority he had been and still was — these things struck her, on the spot, as making up for him, in a wonderful way, a character she must take into account in dealing with him either for pity or for envy. He positively, under the impression, seemed to loom larger than life for her, so that she saw him during these moments in a light of recognition which had had its brightness for her at many an hour of the past, but which had never been so intense and so almost admonitory. His very quietness was part of it now, as always part of everything, of his success, his originality, his modesty, his exquisite public perversity, his inscrutable, incalculable energy; and this quality perhaps it might be — all the more too as the result, for the present occasion, of an admirable, traceable effort — that placed him in her eyes as no precious a work of art probably had ever been placed in his own. There was a long moment, absolutely, during which her impression rose and rose, even as that of the typical charmed gazer, in the still museum, before the named and dated object, the pride of the catalogue, that time has polished and consecrated. Extraordinary, in particular, was the number of the different ways in which he thus affected her as showing. He was strong — that was the great thing. He was sure — sure for himself, always, whatever his idea: the expression of that in him had somehow never appeared more identical with his proved taste for the rare and the true. But what stood out beyond everything was that he was always, marvellously, young — which couldn't but crown, at this juncture, his whole appeal to her imagination. Before she knew it she was lifted aloft by the consciousness that he was simply a great and deep and high little man, and that to love him with tenderness was not to be distinguished, a whit, from loving him with pride. It came to her, all strangely, as a sudden, an immense relief. The sense that he wasn't a failure, and could never be, purged their predicament of every meanness — made it as if they had really emerged, in their transmuted union, to smile almost without pain. It was like a new confidence, and after another instant she knew even still better why. Wasn't it because now, also, on his side, he was thinking of her as his daughter, was TRYING her, during these mute seconds, as the child of his blood? Oh then, if she wasn't with her little conscious passion, the child of any weakness, what was she but strong enough too? It swelled in her, fairly; it raised her higher, higher: she wasn't in that case a failure either — hadn't been, but the contrary; his strength was her strength, her pride was his, and they were decent and competent together. This was all in the answer she finally made him.

"I believe in you more than any one."

"Than any one at all?"

She hesitated, for all it might mean; but there was — oh a thousand times! — no doubt of it. "Than any

one at all." She kept nothing of it back now, met his eyes over it, let him have the whole of it; after which she went on: "And that's the way, I think, you believe in me."

He looked at her a minute longer, but his tone at last was right. "About the way — yes."

"Well then — ?" She spoke as for the end and for other matters — for anything, everything, else there might be. They would never return to it.

"Well then — !" His hands came out, and while her own took them he drew her to his breast and held her. He held her hard and kept her long, and she let herself go; but it was an embrace that, august and almost stern, produced, for all its intimacy, no revulsion and broke into no inconsequence of tears.

XXXVIII

Maggie was to feel, after this passage, how they had both been helped through it by the influence of that accident of her having been caught, a few nights before, in the familiar embrace of her father's wife. His return to the saloon had chanced to coincide exactly with this demonstration, missed moreover neither by her husband nor by the Assinghams, who, their card-party suspended, had quitted the billiard-room with him. She had been conscious enough at the time of what such an impression, received by the others, might, in that extended state, do for her case; and none the less that, as no one had appeared to wish to be the first to make a remark about it, it had taken on perceptibly the special shade of consecration conferred by unanimities of silence. The effect, she might have considered, had been almost awkward — the promptitude of her separation from Charlotte, as if they had been discovered in some absurdity, on her becoming aware of spectators. The spectators, on the other hand — that was the appearance — mightn't have supposed them, in the existing relation, addicted to mutual endearments; and yet, hesitating with a fine scruple between sympathy and hilarity, must have felt that almost any spoken or laughed comment could be kept from sounding vulgar only by sounding, beyond any permitted measure, intelligent. They had evidently looked, the two young wives, like a pair of women "making up" effusively, as women were supposed to do, especially when approved fools, after a broil; but taking note of the reconciliation would imply, on her father's part, on Amerigo's, and on Fanny Assingham's, some proportionate vision of the grounds of their difference. There had been something, there had been but too much, in the incident, for each observer; yet there was nothing any one could have said without seeming essentially to say: "See, see, the dear things — their quarrel's blissfully over!" "Our quarrel? What quarrel?" the dear things themselves would necessarily, in that case, have demanded; and the wits of the others would thus have been called upon for some agility of exercise. No one had been equal to the flight of producing, off-hand, a fictive reason for any estrangement — to take, that is, the place of the true, which had so long, for the finer sensibility, pervaded the air; and every one, accordingly, not to be inconveniently challenged, was pretending, immediately after, to have remarked nothing that any one else hadn't.

Maggie's own measure had remained, all the same, full of the reflection caught from the total inference; which had acted, virtually, by enabling every one present — and oh Charlotte not least! — to draw a long breath. The message of the little scene had been different for each, but it had been this, markedly, all round, that it reinforced — reinforced even immensely — the general effort, carried on from week to week and of late distinctly more successful, to look and talk and move as if nothing in life were the matter. Supremely, however, while this glass was held up to her, had Maggie's sense turned to the quality of the success constituted, on the spot, for Charlotte. Most of all, if she was guessing how her father must have secretly started, how her husband must have secretly wondered, how Fanny Assingham must have secretly, in a flash, seen daylight for herself — most of all had she tasted, by communication, of the high profit involved for her companion. She FELT, in all her pulses, Charlotte feel it, and how publicity had been required, absolutely, to crown her own abasement. It was the added touch, and now nothing was wanting — which, to do her stepmother justice, Mrs. Verver had appeared but to desire, from that evening, to show, with the last vividness, that she recognised. Maggie lived over again the minutes in question — had found herself repeatedly doing so; to the degree that the whole evening hung together, to her aftersense, as a thing appointed by some occult power that had dealt with her, that had for instance — animated the four with just the right restlessness too, had decreed and directed and exactly timed it in them, making their game of bridge — however abysmal a face it had worn for her — give way, precisely, to their common unavowed impulse to find out, to emulate Charlotte's impatience; a preoccupation, this latter, attached detectedly to the member of the party who was roaming in her queerness and was, for all their simulated blindness, not roaming unnoted.

If Mrs. Verver meanwhile, then, had struck her as determined in a certain direction by the last felicity into which that night had flowered, our young woman was yet not to fail of appreciating the truth that she had not been put at ease, after all, with absolute permanence. Maggie had seen her, unmistakably, desire to rise to the occasion and be magnificent — seen her decide that the right way for this would be to prove that the reassurance she had extorted there, under the high, cool lustre of the saloon, a twinkle of crystal and silver, had not only poured oil upon the troubled waters of their question, but had fairly drenched their whole intercourse with that lubricant. She had exceeded the limit of discretion in this insistence on her capacity to

repay in proportion a service she acknowledged as handsome. “Why handsome?” Maggie would have been free to ask; since if she had been veracious the service assuredly would not have been huge. It would in that case have come up vividly, and for each of them alike, that the truth, on the Princess’s lips, presented no difficulty. If the latter’s mood, in fact, could have turned itself at all to private gaiety it might have failed to resist the diversion of seeing so clever a creature so beguiled. Charlotte’s theory of a generous manner was manifestly to express that her stepdaughter’s word, wiping out, as she might have said, everything, had restored them to the serenity of a relation without a cloud. It had been, in short, in this light, ideally conclusive, so that no ghost of anything it referred to could ever walk again. What was the ecstasy of that, however, but in itself a trifle compromising? — as truly, within the week, Maggie had occasion to suspect her friend of beginning, and rather abruptly, to remember. Convinced as she was of the example already given her by her husband, and in relation to which her profession of trust in his mistress had been an act of conformity exquisitely calculated, her imagination yet sought in the hidden play of his influence the explanation of any change of surface, any difference of expression or intention. There had been, through life, as we know, few quarters in which the Princess’s fancy could let itself loose; but it shook off restraint when it plunged into the figured void of the detail of that relation. This was a realm it could people with images — again and again with fresh ones; they swarmed there like the strange combinations that lurked in the woods at twilight; they loomed into the definite and faded into the vague, their main present sign for her being, however, that they were always, that they were duskily, agitated. Her earlier vision of a state of bliss made insecure by the very intensity of the bliss — this had dropped from her; she had ceased to see, as she lost herself, the pair of operatic, of high Wagnerian lovers (she found, deep within her, these comparisons) interlocked in their wood of enchantment, a green glade as romantic as one’s dream of an old German forest. The picture was veiled, on the contrary, with the dimness of trouble; behind which she felt, indistinguishable, the procession of forms that had lost, all so pitifully, their precious confidence. Therefore, though there was in these days, for her, with Amerigo, little enough even of the imitation, from day to day, of unembarrassed references — as she had foreseen, for that matter, from the first, that there would be — her active conception of his accessibility to their companion’s own private and unextinguished right to break ground was not much less active than before. So it was that her inner sense, in spite of everything, represented him as still pulling wires and controlling currents, or rather indeed as muffling the whole possibility, keeping it down and down, leading his accomplice continually on to some new turn of the road. As regards herself Maggie had become more conscious from week to week of his ingenuities of intention to make up to her for their forfeiture, in so dire a degree, of any reality of frankness — a privation that had left on his lips perhaps a little of the same thirst with which she fairly felt her own distorted, the torment of the lost pilgrim who listens in desert sands for the possible, the impossible, plash of water. It was just this hampered state in him, none the less, that she kept before her when she wished most to find grounds of dignity for the hard little passion which nothing he had done could smother. There were hours enough, lonely hours, in which she let dignity go; then there were others when, clinging with her winged concentration to some deep cell of her heart, she stored away her hived tenderness as if she had gathered it all from flowers. He was walking ostensibly beside her, but in fact given over, without a break, to the grey medium in which he helplessly groped; a perception on her part which was a perpetual pang and which might last what it would — for ever if need be — but which, if relieved at all, must be relieved by his act alone. She herself could do nothing more for it; she had done the utmost possible. It was meantime not the easier to bear for this aspect under which Charlotte was presented as depending on him for guidance, taking it from him even in doses of bitterness, and yet lost with him in devious depths. Nothing was thus more sharply to be inferred than that he had promptly enough warned her, on hearing from her of the precious assurance received from his wife, that she must take care her satisfaction didn’t betray something of her danger. Maggie had a day of still waiting, after allowing him time to learn how unreservedly she had lied for him — of waiting as for the light of she scarce knew what slow-shining reflection of this knowledge in his personal attitude. What retarded evolution, she asked herself in these hours, mightn’t poor Charlotte all unwittingly have precipitated? She was thus poor Charlotte again for Maggie even while Maggie’s own head was bowed, and the reason for this kept coming back to our young woman in the conception of what would secretly have passed. She saw her, face to face with the Prince, take from him the chill of his stiffest admonition, with the possibilities of deeper difficulty that it represented for each. She heard her ask, irritated and sombre, what tone, in God’s name — since her bravery didn’t suit him — she was then to adopt; and, by way of a fantastic flight of divination, she heard Amerigo reply, in a voice of which every

fine note, familiar and admirable, came home to her, that one must really manage such prudences a little for one's self. It was positive in the Princess that, for this, she breathed Charlotte's cold air — turned away from him in it with her, turned with her, in growing compassion, this way and that, hovered behind her while she felt her ask herself where then she should rest. Marvellous the manner in which, under such imaginations, Maggie thus circled and lingered — quite as if she were, materially, following her unseen, counting every step she helplessly wasted, noting every hindrance that brought her to a pause.

A few days of this, accordingly, had wrought a change in that apprehension of the instant beatitude of triumph — of triumph magnanimous and serene — with which the upshot of the night-scene on the terrace had condemned our young woman to make terms. She had had, as we know, her vision of the gilt bars bent, of the door of the cage forced open from within and the creature imprisoned roaming at large — a movement, on the creature's part, that was to have even, for the short interval, its impressive beauty, but of which the limit, and in yet another direction, had loomed straight into view during her last talk under the great trees with her father. It was when she saw his wife's face ruefully attached to the quarter to which, in the course of their session, he had so significantly addressed his own — it was then that Maggie could watch for its turning pale, it was then she seemed to know what she had meant by thinking of her, in she shadow of his most ominous reference, as "doomed." If, as I say, her attention now, day after day, so circled and hovered, it found itself arrested for certain passages during which she absolutely looked with Charlotte's grave eyes. What she unfailingly made out through them was the figure of a little quiet gentleman who mostly wore, as he moved, alone, across the field of vision, a straw hat, a white waistcoat and a blue necktie, keeping a cigar in his teeth and his hands in his pockets, and who, oftener than not, presented a somewhat meditative back while he slowly measured the perspectives of the park and broodingly counted (it might have appeared) his steps. There were hours of intensity, for a week or two, when it was for all the world as if she had guardedly tracked her stepmother, in the great house, from room to room and from window to window, only to see her, here and there and everywhere, TRY her uneasy outlook, question her issue and her fate. Something, unmistakably, had come up for her that had never come up before; it represented a new complication and had begotten a new anxiety — things, these, that she carried about with her done up in the napkin of her lover's accepted rebuke, while she vainly hunted for some corner where she might put them safely down. The disguised solemnity, the prolonged futility of her search might have been grotesque to a more ironic eye; but Maggie's provision of irony, which we have taken for naturally small, had never been so scant as now, and there were moments while she watched with her, thus unseen, when the mere effect of being near her was to feel her own heart in her throat, was to be almost moved to saying to her: "Hold on tight, my poor dear — without TOO MUCH terror — and it will all come out somehow."

Even to that indeed, she could reflect, Charlotte might have replied that it was easy to say; even to that no great meaning could attach so long as the little meditative man in the straw hat kept coming into view with his indescribable air of weaving his spell, weaving it off there by himself. In whatever quarter of the horizon the appearances were scanned he was to be noticed as absorbed in this occupation; and Maggie was to become aware of two or three extraordinary occasions of receiving from him the hint that he measured the impression he produced. It was not really till after their recent long talk in the park that she knew how deeply, how quite exhaustively, they had then communicated — so that they were to remain together, for the time, in consequence, quite in the form of a couple of sociable drinkers who sit back from the table over which they have been resting their elbows, over which they have emptied to the last drop their respective charged cups. The cups were still there on the table, but turned upside down; and nothing was left for the companions but to confirm by placid silences the fact that the wine had been good. They had parted, positively, as if, on either side, primed with it — primed for whatever was to be; and everything between them, as the month waned, added its touch of truth to this similitude. Nothing, truly, WAS at present between them save that they were looking at each other in infinite trust; it fairly wanted no more words, and when they met, during the deep summer days, met even without witnesses, when they kissed at morning and evening, or on any of the other occasions of contact that they had always so freely celebrated, a pair of birds of the upper air could scarce have appeared less to invite each other to sit down and worry afresh. So it was that in the house itself, where more of his waiting treasures than ever were provisionally ranged, she sometimes only looked at him — from end to end of the great gallery, the pride of the house, for instance — as if, in one of the halls of a museum, she had been an earnest young woman with a Baedeker and he a vague gentleman to whom even Baedekers were unknown. He had ever, of course, had his way of walking about to review his possessions and verify

their condition; but this was a pastime to which he now struck her as almost extravagantly addicted, and when she passed near him and he turned to give her a smile she caught — or so she fancied — the greater depth of his small, perpetual hum of contemplation. It was as if he were singing to himself, sotto voce, as he went — and it was also, on occasion, quite ineffably, as if Charlotte, hovering, watching, listening, on her side too, kept sufficiently within earshot to make it out as song, and yet, for some reason connected with the very manner of it, stood off and didn't dare.

One of the attentions she had from immediately after her marriage most freely paid him was that of her interest in his rarities, her appreciation of his taste, her native passion for beautiful objects and her grateful desire not to miss anything he could teach her about them. Maggie had in due course seen her begin to "work" this fortunately natural source of sympathy for all it was worth. She took possession of the mound throughout its extent; she abounded, to odd excess, one might have remarked, in the assumption of its being for her, with her husband, ALL the ground, the finest, clearest air and most breathable medium common to them. It had been given to Maggie to wonder if she didn't, in these intensities of approbation, too much shut him up to his province; but this was a complaint he had never made his daughter, and Charlotte must at least have had for her that, thanks to her admirable instinct, her range of perception marching with his own and never falling behind, she had probably not so much as once treated him to a rasping mistake or a revealing stupidity. Maggie, wonderfully, in the summer days, felt it forced upon her that that was one way, after all, of being a genial wife; and it was never so much forced upon her as at these odd moments of her encountering the sposi, as Amerigo called them, under the coved ceilings of Fawns while, so together, yet at the same time so separate, they were making their daily round. Charlotte hung behind, with emphasised attention; she stopped when her husband stopped, but at the distance of a case or two, or of whatever other succession of objects; and the likeness of their connection would not have been wrongly figured if he had been thought of as holding in one of his pocketed hands the end of a long silken halter looped round her beautiful neck. He didn't twitch it, yet it was there; he didn't drag her, but she came; and those indications that I have described the Princess as finding extraordinary in him were two or three mute facial intimations which his wife's presence didn't prevent his addressing his daughter — nor prevent his daughter, as she passed, it was doubtless to be added, from flushing a little at the receipt of. They amounted perhaps only to a wordless, wordless smile, but the smile was the soft shake of the twisted silken rope, and Maggie's translation of it, held in her breast till she got well away, came out only, as if it might have been overheard, when some door was closed behind her. "Yes, you see — I lead her now by the neck, I lead her to her doom, and she doesn't so much as know what it is, though she has a fear in her heart which, if you had the chances to apply your ear there that I, as a husband, have, you would hear thump and thump and thump. She thinks it MAY be, her doom, the awful place over there — awful for HER; but she's afraid to ask, don't you see? just as she's afraid of not asking; just as she's afraid of so many other things that she sees multiplied round her now as portents and betrayals. She'll know, however — when she does know."

Charlotte's one opportunity, meanwhile, for the air of confidence she had formerly worn so well and that agreed so with her firm and charming type, was the presence of visitors, never, as the season advanced, wholly intermitted — rather, in fact, so constant, with all the people who turned up for luncheon and for tea and to see the house, now replete, now famous, that Maggie grew to think again of this large element of "company" as of a kind of renewed water-supply for the tank in which, like a party of panting gold-fish, they kept afloat. It helped them, unmistakably, with each other, weakening the emphasis of so many of the silences of which their intimate intercourse would otherwise have consisted. Beautiful and wonderful for her, even, at times, was the effect of these interventions — their effect above all in bringing home to each the possible heroism of perfunctory things. They learned fairly to live in the perfunctory; they remained in it as many hours of the day as might be; it took on finally the likeness of some spacious central chamber in a haunted house, a great overarched and overglazed rotunda, where gaiety might reign, but the doors of which opened into sinister circular passages. Here they turned up for each other, as they said, with the blank faces that denied any uneasiness felt in the approach; here they closed numerous doors carefully behind them — all save the door that connected the place, as by a straight tented corridor, with the outer world, and, encouraging thus the irruption of society, imitated the aperture through which the bedizened performers of the circus are poured into the ring. The great part Mrs. Verver had socially played came luckily, Maggie could make out, to her assistance; she had "personal friends" — Charlotte's personal friends had ever been, in London, at the two houses, one of the most convenient pleasantries — who actually tempered, at this crisis, her aspect of

isolation; and it wouldn't have been hard to guess that her best moments were those in which she suffered no fear of becoming a bore to restrain her appeal to their curiosity. Their curiosity might be vague, but their clever hostess was distinct, and she marched them about, sparing them nothing, as if she counted, each day, on a harvest of half crowns. Maggie met her again, in the gallery, at the oddest hours, with the party she was entertaining; heard her draw out the lesson, insist upon the interest, snub, even, the particular presumption and smile for the general bewilderment — inevitable features, these latter, of almost any occasion — in a manner that made our young woman, herself incurably dazzled, marvel afresh at the mystery by which a creature who could be in some connexions so earnestly right could be in others so perversely wrong. When her father, vaguely circulating, was attended by his wife, it was always Charlotte who seemed to bring up the rear; but he hung in the background when she did cicerone, and it was then perhaps that, moving mildly and modestly to and fro on the skirts of the exhibition, his appearance of weaving his spell was, for the initiated conscience, least to be resisted. Brilliant women turned to him in vague emotion, but his response scarce committed him more than if he had been the person employed to see that, after the invading wave was spent, the cabinets were all locked and the symmetries all restored.

There was a morning when, during the hour before luncheon and shortly after the arrival of a neighbourly contingent — neighbourly from ten miles off — whom Mrs. Verver had taken in charge, Maggie paused on the threshold of the gallery through which she had been about to pass, faltered there for the very impression of his face as it met her from an opposite door. Charlotte, half-way down the vista, held together, as if by something almost austere in the grace of her authority, the semi-scared (now that they were there!) knot of her visitors, who, since they had announced themselves by telegram as yearning to inquire and admire, saw themselves restricted to this consistency. Her voice, high and clear and a little hard, reached her husband and her step-daughter while she thus placed beyond doubt her cheerful submission to duty. Her words, addressed to the largest publicity, rang for some minutes through the place, every one as quiet to listen as if it had been a church ablaze with tapers and she were taking her part in some hymn of praise. Fanny Assingham looked rapt in devotion — Fanny Assingham who forsook this other friend as little as she forsook either her host or the Princess or the Prince or the Principino; she supported her, in slow revolutions, in murmurous attestations of presence, at all such times, and Maggie, advancing after a first hesitation, was not to fail of noting her solemn, inscrutable attitude, her eyes attentively lifted, so that she might escape being provoked to betray an impression. She betrayed one, however, as Maggie approached, dropping her gaze to the latter's level long enough to seem to adventure, marvellously, on a mute appeal. "You understand, don't you, that if she didn't do this there would be no knowing what she might do?" This light Mrs. Assingham richly launched while her younger friend, unresistingly moved, became uncertain again, and then, not too much to show it — or, rather, positively to conceal it, and to conceal something more as well — turned short round to one of the windows and awkwardly, pointlessly waited. "The largest of the three pieces has the rare peculiarity that the garlands, looped round it, which, as you see, are the finest possible vieux Saxe, are not of the same origin or period, or even, wonderful as they are, of a taste quite so perfect. They have been put on at a later time, by a process of which there are very few examples, and none so important as this, which is really quite unique — so that, though the whole thing is a little baroque, its value as a specimen is, I believe, almost inestimable."

So the high voice quavered, aiming truly at effects far over the heads of gaping neighbours; so the speaker, piling it up, sticking at nothing, as less interested judges might have said, seemed to justify the faith with which she was honoured. Maggie meanwhile, at the window, knew the strangest thing to be happening: she had turned suddenly to crying, or was at least on the point of it — the lighted square before her all blurred and dim. The high voice went on; its quaver was doubtless for conscious ears only, but there were verily thirty seconds during which it sounded, for our young woman, like the shriek of a soul in pain. Kept up a minute longer it would break and collapse — so that Maggie felt herself, the next thing, turn with a start to her father. "Can't she be stopped? Hasn't she done it ENOUGH?" — some such question as that she let herself ask him to suppose in her. Then it was that, across half the gallery — for he had not moved from where she had first seen him — he struck her as confessing, with strange tears in his own eyes, to sharp identity of emotion. "Poor thing, poor thing" — it reached straight— "ISN'T she, for one's credit, on the swagger?" After which, as, held thus together they had still another strained minute, the shame, the pity, the better knowledge, the smothered protest, the divined anguish even, so overcame him that, blushing to his eyes, he turned short away. The affair but of a few muffled moments, this snatched communion yet lifted Maggie as on air — so much, for deep guesses on her own side too, it gave her to think of. There was, honestly, an awful mixture in

things, and it was not closed to her aftersense of such passages — we have already indeed, in other cases, seen it open — that the deepest depth of all, in a perceived penalty, was that you couldn't be sure some of your compunctions and contortions wouldn't show for ridiculous. Amerigo, that morning, for instance, had been as absent as he at this juncture appeared to desire he should mainly be noted as being; he had gone to London for the day and the night — a necessity that now frequently rose for him and that he had more than once suffered to operate during the presence of guests, successions of pretty women, the theory of his fond interest in whom had been publicly cultivated. It had never occurred to his wife to pronounce him ingenuous, but there came at last a high dim August dawn when she couldn't sleep and when, creeping restlessly about and breathing at her window the coolness of wooded acres, she found the faint flush of the east march with the perception of that other almost equal prodigy. It rosily coloured her vision that — even such as he was, yes — her husband could on occasion sin by excess of candour. He wouldn't otherwise have given as his reason for going up to Portland Place in the August days that he was arranging books there. He had bought a great many of late, and he had had others, a large number, sent from Rome — wonders of old print in which her father had been interested. But when her imagination tracked him to the dusty town, to the house where drawn blinds and pale shrouds, where a caretaker and a kitchenmaid were alone in possession, it wasn't to see him, in his shirtsleeves, unpacking battered boxes.

She saw him, in truth, less easily beguiled — saw him wander, in the closed dusky rooms, from place to place, or else, for long periods, recline on deep sofas and stare before him through the smoke of ceaseless cigarettes. She made him out as liking better than anything in the world just now to be alone with his thoughts. Being herself connected with his thoughts, she continued to believe, more than she had ever been, it was thereby a good deal as if he were alone with HER. She made him out as resting so from that constant strain of the perfunctory to which he was exposed at Fawns; and she was accessible to the impression of the almost beggared aspect of this alternative. It was like his doing penance in sordid ways — being sent to prison or being kept without money; it wouldn't have taken much to make her think of him as really kept without food. He might have broken away, might easily have started to travel; he had a right — thought wonderful Maggie now — to so many more freedoms than he took! His secret was of course that at Fawns he all the while winced, was all the while in presences in respect to which he had thrown himself back, with a hard pressure, on whatever mysteries of pride, whatever inward springs familiar to the man of the world, he could keep from snapping. Maggie, for some reason, had that morning, while she watched the sunrise, taken an extraordinary measure of the ground on which he would have HAD to snatch at pretexts for absence. It all came to her there — he got off to escape from a sound. The sound was in her own ears still — that of Charlotte's high coerced quaver before the cabinets in the hushed gallery; the voice by which she herself had been pierced the day before as by that of a creature in anguish and by which, while she sought refuge at the blurred window, the tears had been forced into her eyes. Her comprehension soared so high that the wonder for her became really his not feeling the need of wider intervals and thicker walls. Before THAT admiration she also meditated; consider as she might now, she kept reading not less into what he omitted than into what he performed a beauty of intention that touched her fairly the more by being obscure. It was like hanging over a garden in the dark; nothing was to be made of the confusion of growing things, but one felt they were folded flowers, and their vague sweetness made the whole air their medium. He had to turn away, but he wasn't at least a coward; he would wait on the spot for the issue of what he had done on the spot. She sank to her knees with her arm on the ledge of her window-seat, where she blinded her eyes from the full glare of seeing that his idea could only be to wait, whatever might come, at her side. It was to her buried face that she thus, for a long time, felt him draw nearest; though after a while, when the strange wail of the gallery began to repeat its inevitable echo, she was conscious of how that brought out his pale hard grimace.

XXXIX

The resemblance had not been present to her on first coming out into the hot, still brightness of the Sunday afternoon — only the second Sunday, of all the summer, when the party of six, the party of seven including the Principino, had practically been without accessions or invasions; but within sight of Charlotte, seated far away, very much where she had expected to find her, the Princess fell to wondering if her friend wouldn't be affected quite as she herself had been, that night on the terrace, under Mrs. Verver's perceptive pursuit. The relation, to-day, had turned itself round; Charlotte was seeing her come, through patches of lingering noon, quite as she had watched Charlotte menace her through the starless dark; and there was a moment, that of her waiting a little as they thus met across the distance, when the interval was bridged by a recognition not less soundless, and to all appearance not less charged with strange meanings, than that of the other occasion. The point, however, was that they had changed places; Maggie had from her window, seen her stepmother leave the house — at so unlikely an hour, three o'clock of a canicular August, for a ramble in garden or grove — and had thereupon felt her impulse determined with the same sharpness that had made the spring of her companion's three weeks before. It was the hottest day of the season, and the shaded siesta, for people all at their ease, would certainly rather have been prescribed; but our young woman had perhaps not yet felt it so fully brought home that such refinements of repose, among them, constituted the empty chair at the feast. This was the more distinct as the feast, literally, in the great bedimmed dining-room, the cool, ceremonious semblance of luncheon, had just been taking place without Mrs. Verver. She had been represented but by the plea of a bad headache, not reported to the rest of the company by her husband, but offered directly to Mr. Verver himself, on their having assembled, by her maid, deputed for the effect and solemnly producing it.

Maggie had sat down, with the others, to viands artfully iced, to the slow circulation of precious tinkling jugs, to marked reserves of reference in many directions — poor Fanny Assingham herself scarce thrusting her nose out of the padded hollow into which she had withdrawn. A consensus of languor, which might almost have been taken for a community of dread, ruled the scene — relieved only by the fitful experiments of Father Mitchell, good holy, hungry man, a trusted and overworked London friend and adviser, who had taken, for a week or two, the light neighbouring service, local rites flourishing under Maggie's munificence, and was enjoying, as a convenience, all the bounties of the house. HE conversed undiscouraged, Father Mitchell — conversed mainly with the indefinite, wandering smile of the entertainers, and the Princess's power to feel him on the whole a blessing for these occasions was not impaired by what was awkward in her consciousness of having, from the first of her trouble, really found her way without his guidance. She asked herself at times if he suspected how more than subtly, how perversely, she had dispensed with him, and she balanced between visions of all he must privately have guessed and certitudes that he had guessed nothing whatever. He might nevertheless have been so urbanely filling up gaps, at present, for the very reason that his instinct, sharper than the expression of his face, had sufficiently served him — made him aware of the thin ice, figuratively speaking, and of prolongations of tension, round about him, mostly foreign to the circles in which luxury was akin to virtue. Some day in some happier season, she would confess to him that she hadn't confessed, though taking so much on her conscience; but just now she was carrying in her weak, stiffened hand a glass filled to the brim, as to which she had recorded a vow that no drop should overflow. She feared the very breath of a better wisdom, the jostle of the higher light, of heavenly help itself; and, in addition, however that might be, she drew breath this afternoon, as never yet, in an element heavy to oppression. Something grave had happened, somehow and somewhere, and she had, God knew, her choice of suppositions: her heart stood still when she wondered above all if the cord mightn't at last have snapped between her husband and her father. She shut her eyes for dismay at the possibility of such a passage — there moved before them the procession of ugly forms it might have taken. "Find out for yourself!" she had thrown to Amerigo, for her last word, on the question of who else "knew," that night of the breaking of the Bowl; and she flattered herself that she hadn't since then helped him, in her clear consistency, by an inch. It was what she had given him, all these weeks, to be busy with, and she had again and again lain awake for the obsession of this sense of his uncertainty ruthlessly and endlessly playing with his dignity. She had handed him over to an ignorance that couldn't even try to become indifferent and that yet wouldn't project itself, either, into the cleared air of conviction. In proportion as he was generous it had bitten into his spirit, and more than once she had said to herself that to break the spell she had cast upon him and that the polished old ivory of her father's

inattackable surface made so absolute, he would suddenly commit some mistake or some violence, smash some windowpane for air, fail even of one of his blest inveteracies of taste. In that way, fatally, he would have put himself in the wrong — blighting by a single false step the perfection of his outward show.

These shadows rose and fell for her while Father Mitchell prattled; with other shadows as well, those that hung over Charlotte herself, those that marked her as a prey to equal suspicions — to the idea, in particular, of a change, such a change as she didn't dare to face, in the relations of the two men. Or there were yet other possibilities, as it seemed to Maggie; there were always too many, and all of them things of evil when one's nerves had at last done for one all that nerves could do; had left one in a darkness of prowling dangers that was like the predicament of the night-watcher in a beast-haunted land who has no more means for a fire. She might, with such nerves, have supposed almost anything of any one; anything, almost, of poor Bob Assingham, condemned to eternal observances and solemnly appreciating her father's wine; anything, verily, yes, of the good priest, as he finally sat back with fat folded hands and twiddled his thumbs on his stomach. The good priest looked hard at the decanters, at the different dishes of dessert — he eyed them, half-obliquely, as if THEY might have met him to-day, for conversation, better than any one present. But the Princess had her fancy at last about that too; she was in the midst of a passage, before she knew it, between Father Mitchell and Charlotte — some approach he would have attempted with her, that very morning perhaps, to the circumstance of an apparent detachment, recently noted in her, from any practice of devotion. He would have drawn from this, say, his artless inference — taken it for a sign of some smothered inward trouble and pointed, naturally, the moral that the way out of such straits was not through neglect of the grand remedy. He had possibly prescribed contrition — he had at any rate quickened in her the beat of that false repose to which our young woman's own act had devoted her at her all so deluded instance. The falsity of it had laid traps compared to which the imputation of treachery even accepted might have seemed a path of roses. The acceptance, strangely, would have left her nothing to do — she could have remained, had she liked, all insolently passive; whereas the failure to proceed against her, as it might have been called, left her everything, and all the more that it was wrapped so in confidence. She had to confirm, day after day, the rightness of her cause and the justice and felicity of her exemption — so that wouldn't there have been, fairly, in any explicit concern of Father Mitchell's, depths of practical derision of her success?

The question was provisionally answered, at all events, by the time the party at luncheon had begun to disperse — with Maggie's version of Mrs. Verver sharp to the point of representing her pretext for absence as a positive flight from derision. She met the good priest's eyes before they separated, and priests were really, at the worst, so to speak, such wonderful people that she believed him for an instant on the verge of saying to her, in abysmal softness: "Go to Mrs. Verver, my child — YOU go: you'll find that you can help her." This didn't come, however; nothing came but the renewed twiddle of thumbs over the satisfied stomach and the full flush, the comical candour, of reference to the hand employed at Fawns for mayonnaise of salmon. Nothing came but the receding backs of each of the others — her father's slightly bent shoulders, in especial, which seemed to weave his spell, by the force of habit, not less patiently than if his wife had been present. Her husband indeed was present to feel anything there might be to feel — which was perhaps exactly why this personage was moved promptly to emulate so definite an example of "sloping." He had his occupations — books to arrange perhaps even at Fawns; the idea of the siesta, moreover, in all the conditions, had no need to be loudly invoked. Maggie, was, in the event, left alone for a minute with Mrs. Assingham, who, after waiting for safety, appeared to have at heart to make a demonstration. The stage of "talking over" had long passed for them; when they communicated now it was on quite ultimate facts; but Fanny desired to testify to the existence, on her part, of an attention that nothing escaped. She was like the kind lady who, happening to linger at the circus while the rest of the spectators pour grossly through the exits, falls in with the overworked little trapezist girl — the acrobatic support presumably of embarrassed and exacting parents — and gives her, as an obscure and meritorious artist, assurance of benevolent interest. What was clearest, always, in our young woman's imaginings, was the sense of being herself left, for any occasion, in the breach. She was essentially there to bear the burden, in the last resort, of surrounding omissions and evasions, and it was eminently to that office she had been to-day abandoned — with this one alleviation, as appeared, of Mrs. Assingham's keeping up with her. Mrs. Assingham suggested that she too was still on the ramparts — though her gallantry proved indeed after a moment to consist not a little of her curiosity. She had looked about and seen their companions beyond earshot.

"Don't you really want us to go — ?"

Maggie found a faint smile. “Do you really want to — ?”

It made her friend colour. “Well then — no. But we WOULD, you know, at a look from you. We’d pack up and be off — as a sacrifice.”

“Ah, make no sacrifice,” said Maggie. “See me through.”

“That’s it — that’s all I want. I should be too base — ! Besides,” Fanny went on, “you’re too splendid.”

“Splendid?”

“Splendid. Also, you know, you ARE all but ‘through.’ You’ve done it,” said Mrs. Assingham. But Maggie only half took it from her.

“What does it strike you that I’ve done?”

“What you wanted. They’re going.”

Maggie continued to look at her. “Is that what I wanted?”

“Oh, it wasn’t for you to say. That was his business.”

“My father’s?” Maggie asked after an hesitation.

“Your father’s. He has chosen — and now she knows. She sees it all before her — and she can’t speak, or resist, or move a little finger. That’s what’s the matter with HER,” said Fanny Assingham.

It made a picture, somehow, for the Princess, as they stood there — the picture that the words of others, whatever they might be, always made for her, even when her vision was already charged, better than any words of her own. She saw, round about her, through the chinks of the shutters, the hard glare of nature — saw Charlotte, somewhere in it, virtually at bay, and yet denied the last grace of any protecting truth. She saw her off somewhere all unaided, pale in her silence and taking in her fate. “Has she told you?” she then asked.

Her companion smiled superior. “*I* don’t need to be told — either! I see something, thank God, every day.” And then as Maggie might appear to be wondering what, for instance: “I see the long miles of ocean and the dreadful great country, State after State — which have never seemed to me so big or so terrible. I see THEM at last, day by day and step by step, at the far end — and I see them never come back. But NEVER — simply. I see the extraordinary ‘interesting’ place — which I’ve never been to, you know, and you have — and the exact degree in which she will be expected to be interested.”

“She WILL be,” Maggie presently replied. “Expected?”

“Interested.”

For a little, after this, their eyes met on it; at the end of which Fanny said: “She’ll be — yes — what she’ll HAVE to be. And it will be — won’t it? for ever and ever.” She spoke as abounding in her friend’s sense, but it made Maggie still only look at her.

These were large words and large visions — all the more that now, really, they spread and spread. In the midst of them, however, Mrs. Assingham had soon enough continued. “When I talk of ‘knowing,’ indeed, I don’t mean it as you would have a right to do. You know because you see — and I don’t see HIM. I don’t make him out,” she almost crudely confessed.

Maggie again hesitated. “You mean you don’t make out Amerigo?”

But Fanny shook her head, and it was quite as if, as an appeal to one’s intelligence, the making out of Amerigo had, in spite of everything, long been superseded. Then Maggie measured the reach of her allusion, and how what she next said gave her meaning a richness. No other name was to be spoken, and Mrs. Assingham had taken that, without delay, from her eyes — with a discretion, still, that fell short but by an inch. “You know how he feels.”

Maggie at this then slowly matched her headshake. “I know nothing.”

“You know how YOU feel.”

But again she denied it. “I know nothing. If I did — !”

“Well, if you did?” Fanny asked as she faltered.

She had had enough, however. “I should die,” she said as she turned away.

She went to her room, through the quiet house; she roamed there a moment, picking up, pointlessly, a different fan, and then took her way to the shaded apartments in which, at this hour, the Principino would be enjoying his nap. She passed through the first empty room, the day nursery, and paused at an open door. The inner room, large, dim and cool, was equally calm; her boy’s ample, antique, historical, royal crib, consecrated, reputedly, by the guarded rest of heirs-apparent, and a gift, early in his career, from his grandfather, ruled the scene from the centre, in the stillness of which she could almost hear the child’s soft breathing. The prime protector of his dreams was installed beside him; her father sat there with as little

motion — with head thrown back and supported, with eyes apparently closed, with the fine foot that was so apt to betray nervousness at peace upon the other knee, with the unfathomable heart folded in the constant flawless freshness of the white waistcoat that could always receive in its armholes the firm prehensile thumbs. Mrs. Noble had majestically melted, and the whole place signed her temporary abdication; yet the actual situation was regular, and Maggie lingered but to look. She looked over her fan, the top of which was pressed against her face, long enough to wonder if her father really slept or if, aware of her, he only kept consciously quiet. Did his eyes truly fix her between lids partly open, and was she to take this — his forebearance from any question — only as a sign again that everything was left to her? She at all events, for a minute, watched his immobility — then, as if once more renewing her total submission, returned, without a sound, to her own quarters.

A strange impulse was sharp in her, but it was not, for her part, the desire to shift the weight. She could as little have slept as she could have slept that morning, days before, when she had watched the first dawn from her window. Turned to the east, this side of her room was now in shade, with the two wings of the casement folded back and the charm she always found in her seemingly perched position — as if her outlook, from above the high terraces, was that of some castle-tower mounted on a rock. When she stood there she hung over, over the gardens and the woods — all of which drowsed below her, at this hour, in the immensity of light. The miles of shade looked hot, the banks of flowers looked dim; the peacocks on the balustrades let their tails hang limp and the smaller birds lurked among the leaves. Nothing therefore would have appeared to stir in the brilliant void if Maggie, at the moment she was about to turn away, had not caught sight of a moving spot, a clear green sunshade in the act of descending a flight of steps. It passed down from the terrace, receding, at a distance, from sight, and carried, naturally, so as to conceal the head and back of its bearer; but Maggie had quickly recognised the white dress and the particular motion of this adventurer — had taken in that Charlotte, of all people, had chosen the glare of noon for an exploration of the gardens, and that she could be betaking herself only to some unvisited quarter deep in them, or beyond them, that she had already marked as a superior refuge. The Princess kept her for a few minutes in sight, watched her long enough to feel her, by the mere betrayal of her pace and direction, driven in a kind of flight, and then understood, for herself, why the act of sitting still had become impossible to either of them. There came to her, confusedly, some echo of an ancient fable — some vision of Io goaded by the gadfly or of Ariadne roaming the lone sea-strand. It brought with it all the sense of her own intention and desire; she too might have been, for the hour, some far-off harassed heroine — only with a part to play for which she knew, exactly, no inspiring precedent. She knew but that, all the while — all the while of her sitting there among the others without her — she had wanted to go straight to this detached member of the party and make somehow, for her support, the last demonstration. A pretext was all that was needful, and Maggie after another instant had found one. She had caught a glimpse, before Mrs. Verver disappeared, of her carrying a book — made out, half lost in the folds of her white dress, the dark cover of a volume that was to explain her purpose in case of her being met with surprise, and the mate of which, precisely, now lay on Maggie's table. The book was an old novel that the Princess had a couple of days before mentioned having brought down from Portland Place in the charming original form of its three volumes. Charlotte had hailed, with a specious glitter of interest, the opportunity to read it, and our young woman had, thereupon, on the morrow, directed her maid to carry it to Mrs. Verver's apartments. She was afterwards to observe that this messenger, unintelligent or inadvertent, had removed but one of the volumes, which happened not to be the first. Still possessed, accordingly, of the first while Charlotte, going out, fantastically, at such an hour, to cultivate romance in an arbour, was helplessly armed with the second, Maggie prepared on the spot to sally forth with succour. The right volume, with a parasol, was all she required — in addition, that is, to the bravery of her general idea. She passed again through the house, unchallenged, and emerged upon the terrace, which she followed, hugging the shade, with that consciousness of turning the tables on her friend which we have already noted. But so far as she went, after descending into the open and beginning to explore the grounds, Mrs. Verver had gone still further — with the increase of the oddity, moreover, of her having exchanged the protection of her room for these exposed and shining spaces. It was not, fortunately, however, at last, that by persisting in pursuit one didn't arrive at regions of admirable shade: this was the asylum, presumably, that the poor wandering woman had had in view — several wide alleys, in particular, of great length, densely overarched with the climbing rose and the honeysuckle and converging, in separate green vistas, at a sort of umbrageous temple, an ancient rotunda, pillared and statued, niched and roofed, yet with its uncorrected antiquity, like that of everything else at

Fawns, conscious hitherto of no violence from the present and no menace from the future. Charlotte had paused there, in her frenzy, or what ever it was to be called; the place was a conceivable retreat, and she was staring before her, from the seat to which she appeared to have sunk, all unwittingly, as Maggie stopped at the beginning of one of the perspectives.

It was a repetition more than ever then of the evening on the terrace; the distance was too great to assure her she had been immediately seen, but the Princess waited, with her intention, as Charlotte on the other occasion had waited — allowing, oh allowing, for the difference of the intention! Maggie was full of the sense of THAT — so full that it made her impatient; whereupon she moved forward a little, placing herself in range of the eyes that had been looking off elsewhere, but that she had suddenly called to recognition. Charlotte had evidently not dreamed of being followed, and instinctively, with her pale stare, she stiffened herself for protest. Maggie could make that out — as well as, further, however, that her second impression of her friend's approach had an instant effect on her attitude. The Princess came nearer, gravely and in silence, but fairly paused again, to give her time for whatever she would. Whatever she would, whatever she could, was what Maggie wanted — wanting above all to make it as easy for her as the case permitted. That was not what Charlotte had wanted the other night, but this never mattered — the great thing was to allow her, was fairly to produce in her, the sense of highly choosing. At first, clearly, she had been frightened; she had not been pursued, it had quickly struck her, without some design on the part of her pursuer, and what might she not be thinking of in addition but the way she had, when herself the pursuer, made her stepdaughter take in her spirit and her purpose? It had sunk into Maggie at the time, that hard insistence, and Mrs. Verver had felt it and seen it and heard it sink; which wonderful remembrance of pressure successfully applied had naturally, till now, remained with her. But her stare was like a projected fear that the buried treasure, so dishonestly come by, for which her companion's still countenance, at the hour and afterwards, had consented to serve as the deep soil, might have worked up again to the surface, to be thrown back upon her hands. Yes, it was positive that during one of these minutes the Princess had the vision of her particular alarm. "It's her lie, it's her lie that has mortally disagreed with her; she can keep down no longer her rebellion at it, and she has come to retract it, to disown it and denounce it — to give me full in my face the truth instead." This, for a concentrated instant, Maggie felt her helplessly gasp — but only to let it bring home the indignity, the pity of her state. She herself could but tentatively hover, place in view the book she carried, look as little dangerous, look as abjectly mild, as possible; remind herself really of people she had read about in stories of the wild west, people who threw up their hands, on certain occasions, as a sign they weren't carrying revolvers. She could almost have smiled at last, troubled as she yet knew herself, to show how richly she was harmless; she held up her volume, which was so weak a weapon, and while she continued, for consideration, to keep her distance, she explained with as quenched a quaver as possible. "I saw you come out — saw you from my window, and couldn't bear to think you should find yourself here without the beginning of your book. THIS is the beginning; you've got the wrong volume, and I've brought you out the right."

She remained after she had spoken; it was like holding a parley with a possible adversary, and her intense, her exalted little smile asked for formal leave. "May I come nearer now?" she seemed to say — as to which, however, the next minute, she saw Charlotte's reply lose itself in a strange process, a thing of several sharp stages, which she could stand there and trace. The dread, after a minute, had dropped from her face; though, discernibly enough, she still couldn't believe in her having, in so strange a fashion, been deliberately made up to. If she had been made up to, at least, it was with an idea — the idea that had struck her at first as necessarily dangerous. That it wasn't, insistently wasn't, this shone from Maggie with a force finally not to be resisted; and on that perception, on the immense relief so constituted, everything had by the end of three minutes extraordinarily changed. Maggie had come out to her, really, because she knew her doomed, doomed to a separation that was like a knife in her heart; and in the very sight of her uncontrollable, her blinded physical quest of a peace not to be grasped, something of Mrs. Assingham's picture of her as thrown, for a grim future, beyond the great sea and the great continent had at first found fulfilment. She had got away, in this fashion — burning behind her, almost, the ships of disguise — to let her horror of what was before her play up without witnesses; and even after Maggie's approach had presented an innocent front it was still not to be mistaken that she bristled with the signs of her extremity. It was not to be said for them, either, that they were draped at this hour in any of her usual graces; unveiled and all but unashamed, they were tragic to the Princess in spite of the dissimulation that, with the return of comparative confidence, was so promptly to operate. How tragic, in essence, the very change made vivid, the instant stiffening of the spring of pride —

this for possible defence if not for possible aggression. Pride indeed, the next moment, had become the mantle caught up for protection and perversity; she flung it round her as a denial of any loss of her freedom. To be doomed was, in her situation, to have extravagantly incurred a doom, so that to confess to wretchedness was, by the same stroke, to confess to falsity. She wouldn't confess, she didn't — a thousand times no; she only cast about her, and quite frankly and fiercely, for something else that would give colour to her having burst her bonds. Her eyes expanded, her bosom heaved as she invoked it, and the effect upon Maggie was verily to wish she could only help her to it. She presently got up — which seemed to mean "Oh, stay if you like!" and when she had moved about awhile at random, looking away, looking at anything, at everything but her visitor; when she had spoken of the temperature and declared that she revelled in it; when she had uttered her thanks for the book, which, a little incoherently, with her second volume, she perhaps found less clever than she expected; when she had let Maggie approach sufficiently closer to lay, untouched, the tribute in question on a bench and take up obligingly its superfluous mate: when she had done these things she sat down in another place, more or less visibly in possession of her part. Our young woman was to have passed, in all her adventure, no stranger moments; for she not only now saw her companion fairly agree to take her then for the poor little person she was finding it so easy to appear, but fell, in a secret, responsive ecstasy, to wondering if there were not some supreme abjection with which she might be inspired. Vague, but increasingly brighter, this possibility glimmered on her. It at last hung there adequately plain to Charlotte that she had presented herself once more to (as they said) grovel; and that, truly, made the stage large. It had absolutely, within the time, taken on the dazzling merit of being large for each of them alike.

"I'm glad to see you alone — there's something I've been wanting to say to you. I'm tired," said Mrs. Verver, "I'm tired — !"

"Tired — ?" It had dropped the next thing; it couldn't all come at once; but Maggie had already guessed what it was, and the flush of recognition was in her face.

"Tired of this life — the one we've been leading. You like it, I know, but I've dreamed another dream." She held up her head now; her lighted eyes more triumphantly rested; she was finding, she was following her way. Maggie, by the same influence, sat in sight of it; there was something she was SAVING, some quantity of which she herself was judge; and it was for a long moment, even with the sacrifice the Princess had come to make, a good deal like watching her, from the solid shore, plunge into uncertain, into possibly treacherous depths. "I see something else," she went on; "I've an idea that greatly appeals to me — I've had it for a long time. It has come over me that we're wrong. Our real life isn't here."

Maggie held her breath. "'Ours' — ?"

"My husband's and mine. I'm not speaking for you."

"Oh!" said Maggie, only praying not to be, not even to appear, stupid.

"I'm speaking for ourselves. I'm speaking," Charlotte brought out, "for HIM."

"I see. For my father."

"For your father. For whom else?" They looked at each other hard now, but Maggie's face took refuge in the intensity of her interest. She was not at all even so stupid as to treat her companion's question as requiring an answer; a discretion that her controlled stillness had after an instant justified. "I must risk your thinking me selfish — for of course you know what it involves. Let me admit it — I AM selfish. I place my husband first."

"Well," said Maggie smiling and smiling, "since that's where I place mine — !"

"You mean you'll have no quarrel with me? So much the better then; for," Charlotte went on with a higher and higher flight, "my plan is completely formed."

Maggie waited — her glimmer had deepened; her chance somehow was at hand. The only danger was her spoiling it; she felt herself skirting an abyss. "What then, may I ask IS your plan?"

It hung fire but ten seconds; it came out sharp. "To take him home — to his real position. And not to wait."

"Do you mean — a — this season?"

"I mean immediately. And — I may as well tell you now — I mean for my own time. I want," Charlotte said, "to have him at last a little to myself; I want, strange as it may seem to you" — and she gave it all its weight "to KEEP the man I've married. And to do so, I see, I must act."

Maggie, with the effort still to follow the right line, felt herself colour to the eyes. "Immediately?" she thoughtfully echoed.

"As soon as we can get off. The removal of everything is, after all, but a detail. That can always be done; with money, as he spends it, everything can. What I ask for," Charlotte declared, "is the definite break. And I

wish it now." With which her head, like her voice rose higher. "Oh," she added, "I know my difficulty!"

Far down below the level of attention, in she could scarce have said what sacred depths, Maggie's inspiration had come, and it had trembled the next moment into sound. "Do you mean I'M your difficulty?"

"You and he together — since it's always with you that I've had to see him. But it's a difficulty that I'm facing, if you wish to know; that I've already faced; that I propose to myself to surmount. The struggle with it — none too pleasant — hasn't been for me, as you may imagine, in itself charming; I've felt in it at times, if I must tell you all, too great and too strange, an ugliness. Yet I believe it may succeed."

She had risen, with this, Mrs. Verver, and had moved, for the emphasis of it, a few steps away; while Maggie, motionless at first, but sat and looked at her. "You want to take my father FROM me?"

The sharp, successful, almost primitive wail in it made Charlotte turn, and this movement attested for the Princess the felicity of her deceit. Something in her throbbed as it had throbbed the night she stood in the drawing-room and denied that she had suffered. She was ready to lie again if her companion would but give her the opening. Then she should know she had done all. Charlotte looked at her hard, as if to compare her face with her note of resentment; and Maggie, feeling this, met it with the signs of an impression that might pass for the impression of defeat. "I want really to possess him," said Mrs. Verver. "I happen also to feel that he's worth it."

Maggie rose as if to receive her. "Oh — worth it!" she wonderfully threw off.

The tone, she instantly saw, again had its effect: Charlotte flamed aloft — might truly have been believing in her passionate parade. "You've thought YOU'VE known what he's worth?"

"Indeed then, my dear, I believe I have — as I believe I still do."

She had given it, Maggie, straight back, and again it had not missed. Charlotte, for another moment, only looked at her; then broke into the words — Maggie had known they would come — of which she had pressed the spring. "How I see that you loathed our marriage!"

"Do you ASK me?" Maggie after an instant demanded.

Charlotte had looked about her, picked up the parasol she had laid on a bench, possessed herself mechanically of one of the volumes of the relegated novel and then, more consciously, flung it down again: she was in presence, visibly, of her last word. She opened her sunshade with a click; she twirled it on her shoulder in her pride. "'Ask' you? Do I need? How I see," she broke out, "that you've worked against me!"

"Oh, oh, oh!" the Princess exclaimed.

Her companion, leaving her, had reached one of the archways, but on this turned round with a flare. "You haven't worked against me?"

Maggie took it and for a moment kept it; held it, with closed eyes, as if it had been some captured fluttering bird pressed by both hands to her breast. Then she opened her eyes to speak. "What does it matter — if I've failed?"

"You recognise then that you've failed?" asked Charlotte from the threshold.

Maggie waited; she looked, as her companion had done a moment before, at the two books on the seat; she put them together and laid them down; then she made up her mind. "I've failed!" she sounded out before Charlotte, having given her time, walked away. She watched her, splendid and erect, float down the long vista; then she sank upon a seat. Yes, she had done all.

PART SIXTH.

XL

"I'll do anything you like," she said to her husband on one of the last days of the month, "if our being here, this way at this time, seems to you too absurd, or too uncomfortable, or too impossible. We'll either take leave of them now, without waiting — or we'll come back in time, three days before they start. I'll go abroad with you, if you but say the word; to Switzerland, the Tyrol, the Italian Alps, to whichever of your old high places you would like most to see again — those beautiful ones that used to do you good after Rome and that you so often told me about."

Where they were, in the conditions that prompted this offer, and where it might indeed appear ridiculous that, with the stale London September close at hand, they should content themselves with remaining, was where the desert of Portland Place looked blank as it had never looked, and where a drowsy cabman, scanning the horizon for a fare, could sink to oblivion of the risks of immobility. But Amerigo was of the odd opinion, day after day, that their situation couldn't be bettered; and he even went at no moment through the form of replying that, should their ordeal strike her as exceeding their patience, any step they might take would be for her own relief. This was, no doubt, partly because he stood out so wonderfully, to the end, against admitting, by a weak word at least, that any element of their existence WAS, or ever had been, an ordeal; no trap of circumstance, no lapse of "form," no accident of irritation, had landed him in that inconsequence. His wife might verily have suggested that he was consequent — consequent with the admirable appearance he had from the first so undertaken, and so continued, to present — rather too rigidly at HER expense; only, as it happened, she was not the little person to do anything of the sort, and the strange tacit compact actually in operation between them might have been founded on an intelligent comparison, a definite collation positively, of the kinds of patience proper to each. She was seeing him through — he had engaged to come out at the right end if she WOULD see him: this understanding, tacitly renewed from week to week, had fairly received, with the procession of the weeks, the consecration of time; but it scarce needed to be insisted on that she was seeing him on HIS terms, not all on hers, or that, in other words, she must allow him his unexplained and uncharted, his one practicably workable way. If that way, by one of the intimate felicities the liability to which was so far from having even yet completely fallen from him, happened handsomely to show him as more bored than boring (with advantages of his own freely to surrender, but none to be persuadedly indebted to others for,) what did such a false face of the matter represent but the fact itself that she was pledged? If she had questioned or challenged or interfered — if she had reserved herself that right — she wouldn't have been pledged; whereas there were still, and evidently would be yet a while, long, tense stretches during which their case might have been hanging, for every eye, on her possible, her impossible defection. She must keep it up to the last, mustn't absent herself for three minutes from her post: only on those lines, assuredly, would she show herself as with him and not against him.

It was extraordinary how scant a series of signs she had invited him to make of being, of truly having been at any time, "with" his wife: that reflection she was not exempt from as they now, in their suspense, supremely waited — a reflection under the brush of which she recognised her having had, in respect to him as well, to "do all," to go the whole way over, to move, indefatigably, while he stood as fixed in his place as some statue of one of his forefathers. The meaning of it would seem to be, she reasoned in sequestered hours, that he HAD a place, and that this was an attribute somehow indefeasible, unquenchable, which laid upon others — from the moment they definitely wanted anything of him — the necessity of taking more of the steps that he could, of circling round him, of remembering for his benefit the famous relation of the mountain to Mahomet. It was strange, if one had gone into it, but such a place as Amerigo's was like something made for him beforehand by innumerable facts, facts largely of the sort known as historical, made by ancestors, examples, traditions, habits; while Maggie's own had come to show simply as that improvised "post" — a post of the kind spoken of as advanced — with which she was to have found herself connected in the fashion of a settler or a trader in a new country; in the likeness even of some Indian squaw with a papoose on her back and barbarous bead-work to sell. Maggie's own, in short, would have been sought in vain in the most rudimentary map of the social relations as such. The only geography marking it would be doubtless that of the fundamental passions. The "end" that the Prince was at all events holding out for was represented to expectation by his father-in-law's announced departure for America with Mrs. Verver; just as that prospective event had originally figured as advising, for discretion, the flight of the younger couple, to say nothing of the withdrawal of whatever other importunate company, before the great upheaval of Fawns. This residence was

to be peopled for a month by porters, packers and hammerers, at whose operations it had become peculiarly public — public that is for Portland Place — that Charlotte was to preside in force; operations the quite awful appointed scale and style of which had at no moment loomed so large to Maggie's mind as one day when the dear Assinghams swam back into her ken besprinkled with sawdust and looking as pale as if they had seen Samson pull down the temple. They had seen at least what she was not seeing, rich dim things under the impression of which they had retired; she having eyes at present but for the clock by which she timed her husband, or for the glass — the image perhaps would be truer — in which he was reflected to her as HE timed the pair in the country. The accession of their friends from Cadogan Place contributed to all their intermissions, at any rate, a certain effect of resonance; an effect especially marked by the upshot of a prompt exchange of inquiries between Mrs. Assingham and the Princess. It was noted, on the occasion of that anxious lady's last approach to her young friend at Fawns, that her sympathy had ventured, after much accepted privation, again to become inquisitive, and it had perhaps never so yielded to that need as on this question of the present odd "line" of the distinguished eccentrics.

"You mean to say really that you're going to stick here?" And then before Maggie could answer: "What on earth will you do with your evenings?"

Maggie waited a moment — Maggie could still tentatively smile. "When people learn we're here — and of course the papers will be full of it! — they'll flock back in their hundreds, from wherever they are, to catch us. You see you and the Colonel have yourselves done it. As for our evenings, they won't, I dare say, be particularly different from anything else that's ours. They won't be different from our mornings or our afternoons — except perhaps that you two dears will sometimes help us to get through them. I've offered to go anywhere," she added; "to take a house if he will. But THIS — just this and nothing else — is Amerigo's idea. He gave it yesterday" she went on, "a name that, as, he said, described and fitted it. So you see" — and the Princess indulged again in her smile that didn't play, but that only, as might have been said, worked— "so you see there's a method in our madness."

It drew Mrs. Assingham's wonder. "And what then is the name?"

"'The reduction to its simplest expression of what we ARE doing' — that's what he called it. Therefore as we're doing nothing, we're doing it in the most aggravated way — which is the way he desires." With which Maggie further said: "Of course I understand."

"So do I!" her visitor after a moment breathed. "You've had to vacate the house — that was inevitable. But at least here he doesn't funk."

Our young woman accepted the expression. "He doesn't funk."

It only, however, half contented Fanny, who thoughtfully raised her eyebrows. "He's prodigious; but what is there — as you've 'fixed' it — TO dodge? Unless," she pursued, "it's her getting near him; it's — if you'll pardon my vulgarity — her getting AT him. That," she suggested, "may count with him."

But it found the Princess prepared. "She can get near him here. She can get 'at' him. She can come up."

"CAN she?" Fanny Assingham questioned.

"CAN'T she?" Maggie returned.

Their eyes, for a minute, intimately met on it; after which the elder woman said: "I mean for seeing him alone."

"So do I," said the Princess.

At which Fanny, for her reasons, couldn't help smiling. "Oh, if it's for THAT he's staying — !"

"He's staying — I've made it out — to take anything that comes or calls upon him. To take," Maggie went on, "even that." Then she put it as she had at last put it to herself. "He's staying for high decency."

"Decency?" Mrs. Assingham gravely echoed.

"Decency. If she SHOULD try — !"

"Well — ?" Mrs. Assingham urged.

"Well, I hope — !"

"Hope he'll see her?"

Maggie hesitated, however; she made no direct reply. "It's useless hoping," she presently said. "She won't. But he ought to." Her friend's expression of a moment before, which had been apologised for as vulgar, prolonged its sharpness to her ear — that of an electric bell under continued pressure. Stated so simply, what was it but dreadful, truly, that the feasibility of Charlotte's "getting at" the man who for so long had loved her should now be in question? Strangest of all things, doubtless, this care of Maggie's as to what might make for

it or make against it; stranger still her fairly lapsing at moments into a vague calculation of the conceivability, on her own part, with her husband, of some direct sounding of the subject. Would it be too monstrous, her suddenly breaking out to him as in alarm at the lapse of the weeks: “Wouldn’t it really seem that you’re bound in honour to do something for her, privately, before they go?” Maggie was capable of weighing the risk of this adventure for her own spirit, capable of sinking to intense little absences, even while conversing, as now, with the person who had most of her confidence, during which she followed up the possibilities. It was true that Mrs. Assingham could at such times somewhat restore the balance — by not wholly failing to guess her thought. Her thought, however, just at present, had more than one face — had a series that it successively presented. These were indeed the possibilities involved in the adventure of her concerning herself for the quantity of compensation that Mrs. Verver might still look to. There was always the possibility that she WAS, after all, sufficiently to get at him — there was in fact that of her having again and again done so. Against this stood nothing but Fanny Assingham’s apparent belief in her privation — more mercilessly imposed, or more hopelessly felt, in the actual relation of the parties; over and beyond everything that, from more than three months back, of course, had fostered in the Princess a like conviction. These assumptions might certainly be baseless — inasmuch as there were hours and hours of Amerigo’s time that there was no habit, no pretence of his accounting for; inasmuch too as Charlotte, inevitably, had had more than once, to the undisguised knowledge of the pair in Portland Place, been obliged to come up to Eaton Square, whence so many of her personal possessions were in course of removal. She didn’t come to Portland Place — didn’t even come to ask for luncheon on two separate occasions when it reached the consciousness of the household there that she was spending the day in London. Maggie hated, she scorned, to compare hours and appearances, to weigh the idea of whether there hadn’t been moments, during these days, when an assignation, in easy conditions, a snatched interview, in an air the season had so cleared of prying eyes, mightn’t perfectly work. But the very reason of this was partly that, haunted with the vision of the poor woman carrying off with such bravery as she found to her hand the secret of her not being appeased, she was conscious of scant room for any alternative image. The alternative image would have been that the secret covered up was the secret of appeasement somehow obtained, somehow extorted and cherished; and the difference between the two kinds of hiding was too great to permit of a mistake. Charlotte was hiding neither pride nor joy — she was hiding humiliation; and here it was that the Princess’s passion, so powerless for vindictive flights, most inveterately bruised its tenderness against the hard glass of her question.

Behind the glass lurked the WHOLE history of the relation she had so fairly flattened her nose against it to penetrate — the glass Mrs. Verver might, at this stage, have been frantically tapping, from within, by way of supreme, irrepressible entreaty. Maggie had said to herself complacently, after that last passage with her stepmother in the garden of Fawns, that there was nothing left for her to do and that she could thereupon fold her hands. But why wasn’t it still left to push further and, from the point of view of personal pride, grovel lower? — why wasn’t it still left to offer herself as the bearer of a message reporting to him their friend’s anguish and convincing him of her need?

She could thus have translated Mrs. Verver’s tap against the glass, as I have called it, into fifty forms; could perhaps have translated it most into the form of a reminder that would pierce deep. “You don’t know what it is to have been loved and broken with. You haven’t been broken with, because in your RELATION what can there have been, worth speaking of, to break? Ours was everything a relation could be, filled to the brim with the wine of consciousness; and if it was to have no meaning, no better meaning than that such a creature as you could breathe upon it, at your hour, for blight, why was I myself dealt with all for deception? why condemned after a couple of short years to find the golden flame — oh, the golden flame! — a mere handful of black ashes?” Our young woman so yielded, at moments, to what was insidious in these foredoomed ingenuities of her pity, that for minutes together, sometimes, the weight of a new duty seemed to rest upon her — the duty of speaking before separation should constitute its chasm, of pleading for some benefit that might be carried away into exile like the last saved object of price of the emigre, the jewel wrapped in a piece of old silk and negotiable some day in the market of misery.

This imagined service to the woman who could no longer help herself was one of the traps set for Maggie’s spirit at every turn of the road; the click of which, catching and holding the divine faculty fast, was followed inevitably by a flutter, by a struggle of wings and even, as we may say, by a scattering of fine feathers. For they promptly enough felt, these yearnings of thought and excursions of sympathy, the concussion that couldn’t bring them down — the arrest produced by the so remarkably distinct figure that, at

Fawns, for the previous weeks, was constantly crossing, in its regular revolution, the further end of any watched perspective. Whoever knew, or whoever didn't, whether or to what extent Charlotte, with natural business in Eaton Square, had shuffled other opportunities under that cloak, it was all matter for the kind of quiet ponderation the little man who so kept his wandering way had made his own. It was part of the very inveteracy of his straw hat and his white waistcoat, of the trick of his hands in his pockets, of the detachment of the attention he fixed on his slow steps from behind his secure pince-nez. The thing that never failed now as an item in the picture was that gleam of the silken noose, his wife's immaterial tether, so marked to Maggie's sense during her last month in the country. Mrs. Verver's straight neck had certainly not slipped it; nor had the other end of the long cord — oh, quite conveniently long! — disengaged its smaller loop from the hooked thumb that, with his fingers closed upon it, her husband kept out of sight. To have recognised, for all its tenuity, the play of this gathered lasso might inevitably be to wonder with what magic it was twisted, to what tension subjected, but could never be to doubt either of its adequacy to its office or of its perfect durability. These reminded states for the Princess were in fact states of renewed gaping. So many things her father knew that she even yet didn't!

All this, at present, with Mrs. Assingham, passed through her in quick vibrations. She had expressed, while the revolution of her thought was incomplete, the idea of what Amerigo "ought," on his side, in the premises, to be capable of, and then had felt her companion's answering stare. But she insisted on what she had meant. "He ought to wish to see her — and I mean in some protected and independent way, as he used to — in case of her being herself able to manage it. That," said Maggie with the courage of her conviction, "he ought to be ready, he ought to be happy, he ought to feel himself sworn — little as it is for the end of such a history! — to take from her. It's as if he wished to get off without taking anything."

Mrs. Assingham deferentially mused. "But for what purpose is it your idea that they should again so intimately meet?"

"For any purpose they like. That's THEIR affair."

Fanny Assingham sharply laughed, then irrepressibly fell back to her constant position. "You're splendid — perfectly splendid." To which, as the Princess, shaking an impatient head, wouldn't have it again at all, she subjoined: "Or if you're not it's because you're so sure. I mean sure of HIM."

"Ah, I'm exactly NOT sure of him. If I were sure of him I shouldn't doubt — !" But Maggie cast about her.

"Doubt what?" Fanny pressed as she waited.

"Well, that he must feel how much less than she he pays — and how that ought to keep her present to him."

This, in its turn, after an instant, Mrs. Assingham could meet with a smile. "Trust him, my dear, to keep her present! But trust him also to keep himself absent. Leave him his own way."

"I'll leave him everything," said Maggie. "Only — you know it's my nature — I THINK."

"It's your nature to think too much," Fanny Assingham a trifle coarsely risked.

This but quickened, however, in the Princess the act she reprobated. "That may be. But if I hadn't thought — !"

"You wouldn't, you mean, have been where you are?"

"Yes, because they, on their side, thought of everything BUT that. They thought of everything but that I might think."

"Or even," her friend too superficially concurred, "that your father might!"

As to this, at all events, Maggie discriminated. "No, that wouldn't have prevented them; for they knew that his first care would be not to make me do so. As it is," Maggie added, "that has had to become his last."

Fanny Assingham took it in deeper — for what it immediately made her give out louder. "HE'S splendid then." She sounded it almost aggressively; it was what she was reduced to — she had positively to place it.

"Ah, that as much as you please!"

Maggie said this and left it, but the tone of it had the next moment determined in her friend a fresh reaction. "You think, both of you, so abysmally and yet so quietly. But it's what will have saved you."

"Oh," Maggie returned, "it's what — from the moment they discovered we could think at all — will have saved THEM. For they're the ones who are saved," she went on. "We're the ones who are lost."

"Lost — ?"

"Lost to each other — father and I." And then as her friend appeared to demur, "Oh yes," Maggie quite

lucidly declared, “lost to each other much more, really, than Amerigo and Charlotte are; since for them it’s just, it’s right, it’s deserved, while for us it’s only sad and strange and not caused by our fault. But I don’t know,” she went on, “why I talk about myself, for it’s on father it really comes. I let him go,” said Maggie.

“You let him, but you don’t make him.”

“I take it from him,” she answered.

“But what else can you do?”

“I take it from him,” the Princess repeated. “I do what I knew from the first I SHOULD do. I get off by giving him up.”

“But if he gives you?” Mrs. Assingham presumed to object. “Doesn’t it moreover then,” she asked, “complete the very purpose with which he married — that of making you and leaving you more free?”

Maggie looked at her long. “Yes — I help him to do that.”

Mrs. Assingham hesitated, but at last her bravery flared. “Why not call it then frankly his complete success?”

“Well,” said Maggie, “that’s all that’s left me to do.”

“It’s a success,” her friend ingeniously developed, “with which you’ve simply not interfered.” And as if to show that she spoke without levity Mrs. Assingham went further. “He has made it a success for THEM — !”

“Ah, there you are!” Maggie responsively mused. “Yes,” she said the next moment, “that’s why Amerigo stays.”

“Let alone it’s why Charlotte goes.” that Mrs. Assingham, and emboldened, smiled “So he knows — ?”

But Maggie hung back. “Amerigo — ?” After which, however, she blushed — to her companion’s recognition.

“Your father. He knows what YOU know? I mean,” Fanny faltered— “well, how much does he know?” Maggie’s silence and Maggie’s eyes had in fact arrested the push of the question — which, for a decent consistency, she couldn’t yet quite abandon. “What I should rather say is does he know how much?” She found it still awkward. “How much, I mean, they did. How far” — she touched it up— “they went.”

Maggie had waited, but only with a question. “Do you think he does?”

“Know at least something? Oh, about him I can’t think. He’s beyond me,” said Fanny Assingham.

“Then do you yourself know?”

“How much — ?”

“How much.”

“How far — ?”

“How far.”

Fanny had appeared to wish to make sure, but there was something she remembered — remembered in time and even with a smile. “I’ve told you before that I know absolutely nothing.”

“Well — that’s what *I* know,” said the Princess.

Her friend again hesitated. “Then nobody knows — ? I mean,” Mrs. Assingham explained, “how much your father does.”

Oh, Maggie showed that she understood. “Nobody.”

“Not — a little — Charlotte?”

“A little?” the Princess echoed. “To know anything would be, for her, to know enough.”

“And she doesn’t know anything?”

“If she did,” Maggie answered, “Amerigo would.”

“And that’s just it — that he doesn’t?”

“That’s just it,” said the Princess profoundly.

On which Mrs. Assingham reflected. “Then how is Charlotte so held?”

“Just by that.”

“By her ignorance?”

“By her ignorance.” Fanny wondered. “A torment — ?”

“A torment,” said Maggie with tears in her eyes.

Her companion a moment watched them. “But the Prince then — ?”

“How is HE held?” Maggie asked.

“How is HE held?”

“Oh, I can’t tell you that!” And the Princess again broke off.

XLI

A telegram, in Charlotte's name, arrived early— "We shall come and ask you for tea at five, if convenient to you. Am wiring for the Assinghams to lunch." This document, into which meanings were to be read, Maggie promptly placed before her husband, adding the remark that her father and his wife, who would have come up the previous night or that morning, had evidently gone to an hotel. The Prince was in his "own" room, where he often sat now alone; half-a-dozen open newspapers, the "Figaro" notably, as well as the "Times," were scattered about him; but, with a cigar in his teeth and a visible cloud on his brow, he appeared actually to be engaged in walking to and fro. Never yet, on thus approaching him — for she had done it of late, under one necessity or another, several times — had a particular impression so greeted her; supremely strong, for some reason, as he turned quickly round on her entrance. The reason was partly the look in his face — a suffusion like the flush of fever, which brought back to her Fanny Assingham's charge, recently uttered under that roof, of her "thinking" too impenetrably. The word had remained with her and made her think still more; so that, at first, as she stood there, she felt responsible for provoking on his part an irritation of suspense at which she had not aimed. She had been going about him these three months, she perfectly knew, with a maintained idea — of which she had never spoken to him; but what had at last happened was that his way of looking at her, on occasion, seemed a perception of the presence not of one idea, but of fifty, variously prepared for uses with which he somehow must reckon. She knew herself suddenly, almost strangely, glad to be coming to him, at this hour, with nothing more abstract than a telegram; but even after she had stepped into his prison under her pretext, while her eyes took in his face and then embraced the four walls that enclosed his restlessness, she recognised the virtual identity of his condition with that aspect of Charlotte's situation for which, early in the summer and in all the amplitude of a great residence, she had found, with so little seeking, the similitude of the locked cage. He struck her as caged, the man who couldn't now without an instant effect on her sensibility give an instinctive push to the door she had not completely closed behind her. He had been turning twenty ways, for impatiences all his own, and when she was once shut in with him it was yet again as if she had come to him in his more than monastic cell to offer him light or food. There was a difference none the less, between his captivity and Charlotte's — the difference, as it might be, of his lurking there by his own act and his own choice; the admission of which had indeed virtually been in his starting, on her entrance, as if even this were in its degree an interference. That was what betrayed for her, practically, his fear of her fifty ideas, and what had begun, after a minute, to make her wish to repudiate or explain. It was more wonderful than she could have told; it was for all the world as if she was succeeding with him beyond her intention. She had, for these instants, the sense that he exaggerated, that the imputation of purpose had fairly risen too high in him. She had begun, a year ago, by asking herself how she could make him think more of her; but what was it, after all, he was thinking now? He kept his eyes on her telegram; he read it more than once, easy as it was, in spite of its conveyed deprecation, to understand; during which she found herself almost awestruck with yearning, almost on the point of marking somehow what she had marked in the garden at Fawns with Charlotte — that she had truly come unarmed. She didn't bristle with intentions — she scarce knew, as he at this juncture affected her, what had become of the only intention she had come with. She had nothing but her old idea, the old one he knew; she hadn't the ghost of another. Presently in fact, when four or five minutes had elapsed, it was as if she positively, hadn't so much even as that one. He gave her back her paper, asking with it if there were anything in particular she wished him to do.

She stood there with her eyes on him, doubling the telegram together as if it had been a precious thing and yet all the while holding her breath. Of a sudden, somehow, and quite as by the action of their merely having between them these few written words, an extraordinary fact came up. He was with her as if he were hers, hers in a degree and on a scale, with an intensity and an intimacy, that were a new and a strange quantity, that were like the irruption of a tide loosening them where they had stuck and making them feel they floated. What was it that, with the rush of this, just kept her from putting out her hands to him, from catching at him as, in the other time, with the superficial impetus he and Charlotte had privately conspired to impart, she had so often, her breath failing her, known the impulse to catch at her father? She did, however, just yet, nothing inconsequent — though she couldn't immediately have said what saved her; and by the time she had neatly folded her telegram she was doing something merely needful. "I wanted you simply to know — so that you mayn't by accident miss them. For it's the last," said Maggie.

"The last?"

"I take it as their good-bye." And she smiled as she could always smile. "They come in state — to take formal leave. They do everything that's proper. Tomorrow," she said, "they go to Southampton."

"If they do everything that's proper," the Prince presently asked, "why don't they at least come to dine?"

She hesitated, yet she lightly enough provided her answer. "That we must certainly ask them. It will be easy for you. But of course they're immensely taken — !"

He wondered. "So immensely taken that they can't — that your father can't — give you his last evening in England?"

This, for Maggie, was more difficult to meet; yet she was still not without her stop-gap. "That may be what they'll propose — that we shall go somewhere together, the four of us, for a celebration — except that, to round it thoroughly off, we ought also to have Fanny and the Colonel. They don't WANT them at tea, she quite sufficiently expresses; they polish them off, poor dears, they get rid of them, beforehand. They want only us together; and if they cut us down to tea," she continued, "as they cut Fanny and the Colonel down to luncheon, perhaps it's for the fancy, after all, of their keeping their last night in London for each other."

She said these things as they came to her; she was unable to keep them back, even though, as she heard herself, she might have been throwing everything to the winds. But wasn't that the right way — for sharing his last day of captivity with the man one adored? It was every moment more and more for her as if she were waiting with him in his prison — waiting with some gleam of remembrance of how noble captives in the French Revolution, the darkness of the Terror, used to make a feast, or a high discourse, of their last poor resources. If she had broken with everything now, every observance of all the past months, she must simply then take it so — take it that what she had worked for was too near, at last, to let her keep her head. She might have been losing her head verily in her husband's eyes — since he didn't know, all the while, that the sudden freedom of her words was but the diverted intensity of her disposition personally to seize him. He didn't know, either, that this was her manner — now she was with him — of beguiling audaciously the supremacy of suspense. For the people of the French Revolution, assuredly, there wasn't suspense; the scaffold, for those she was thinking of, was certain — whereas what Charlotte's telegram announced was, short of some incalculable error, clear liberation. Just the point, however, was in its being clearer to herself than to him; her clearnesses, clearances — those she had so all but abjectly laboured for — threatened to crowd upon her in the form of one of the clusters of angelic heads, the peopled shafts of light beating down through iron bars, that regale, on occasion, precisely, the fevered vision of those who are in chains. She was going to know, she felt, later on — was going to know with compunction, doubtless, on the very morrow, how thumpingly her heart had beaten at this foretaste of their being left together: she should judge at leisure the surrender she was making to the consciousness of complications about to be bodily lifted. She should judge at leisure even that avidity for an issue which was making so little of any complication but the unextinguished presence of the others; and indeed that she was already simplifying so much more than her husband came out for her next in the face with which he listened. He might certainly well be puzzled, in respect to his father-in-law and Mrs. Verver, by her glance at their possible preference for a concentrated evening. "But it isn't — is it?" he asked — "as if they were leaving each other?"

"Oh no; it isn't as if they were leaving each other. They're only bringing to a close — without knowing when it may open again — a time that has been, naturally, awfully interesting to them." Yes, she could talk so of their "time" — she was somehow sustained; she was sustained even to affirm more intensely her present possession of her ground. "They have their reasons — many things to think of; how can one tell? But there's always, also, the chance of his proposing to me that we shall have our last hours together; I mean that he and I shall. He may wish to take me off to dine with him somewhere alone — and to do it in memory of old days. I mean," the Princess went on, "the real old days; before my grand husband was invented and, much more, before his grand wife was: the wonderful times of his first great interest in what he has since done, his first great plans and opportunities, discoveries and bargains. The way we've sat together late, ever so late, in foreign restaurants, which he used to like; the way that, in every city in Europe, we've stayed on and on, with our elbows on the table and most of the lights put out, to talk over things he had that day seen or heard of or made his offer for, the things he had secured or refused or lost! There were places he took me to — you wouldn't believe! — for often he could only have left me with servants. If he should carry me off with him to-night, for old sake's sake, to the Earl's Court Exhibition, it will be a little — just a very, very little — like our young adventures." After which while Amerigo watched her, and in fact quite because of it, she had an

inspiration, to which she presently yielded. If he was wondering what she would say next she had found exactly the thing. “In that case he will leave you Charlotte to take care of in our absence. You’ll have to carry her off somewhere for your last evening; unless you may prefer to spend it with her here. I shall then see that you dine, that you have everything, quite beautifully. You’ll be able to do as you like.”

She couldn’t have been sure beforehand, and had really not been; but the most immediate result of this speech was his letting her see that he took it for no cheap extravagance either of irony or of oblivion. Nothing in the world, of a truth, had ever been so sweet to her, as his look of trying to be serious enough to make no mistake about it. She troubled him — which hadn’t been at all her purpose; she mystified him — which she couldn’t help and, comparatively, didn’t mind; then it came over her that he had, after all, a simplicity, very considerable, on which she had never dared to presume. It was a discovery — not like the other discovery she had once made, but giving out a freshness; and she recognised again in the light of it the number of the ideas of which he thought her capable. They were all, apparently, queer for him, but she had at least, with the lapse of the months, created the perception that there might be something in them; whereby he stared there, beautiful and sombre, at what she was at present providing him with. There was something of his own in his mind, to which, she was sure, he referred everything for a measure and a meaning; he had never let go of it, from the evening, weeks before, when, in her room, after his encounter with the Bloomsbury cup, she had planted it there by flinging it at him, on the question of her father’s view of him, her determined “Find out for yourself!” She had been aware, during the months, that he had been trying to find out, and had been seeking, above all, to avoid the appearance of any evasions of such a form of knowledge as might reach him, with violence or with a penetration more insidious, from any other source. Nothing, however, had reached him; nothing he could at all conveniently reckon with had disengaged itself for him even from the announcement, sufficiently sudden, of the final secession of their companions. Charlotte was in pain, Charlotte was in torment, but he himself had given her reason enough for that; and, in respect to the rest of the whole matter of her obligation to follow her husband, that personage and she, Maggie, had so shuffled away every link between consequence and cause, that the intention remained, like some famous poetic line in a dead language, subject to varieties of interpretation. What renewed the obscurity was her strange image of their common offer to him, her father’s and her own, of an opportunity to separate from Mrs. Verver with the due amount of form — and all the more that he was, in so pathetic a way, unable to treat himself to a quarrel with it on the score of taste. Taste, in him, as a touchstone, was now all at sea; for who could say but that one of her fifty ideas, or perhaps forty-nine of them, wouldn’t be, exactly, that taste by itself, the taste he had always conformed to, had no importance whatever? If meanwhile, at all events, he felt her as serious, this made the greater reason for her profiting by it as she perhaps might never be able to profit again. She was invoking that reflection at the very moment he brought out, in reply to her last words, a remark which, though perfectly relevant and perfectly just, affected her at first as a high oddity. “They’re doing the wisest thing, you know. For if they were ever to go — !” And he looked down at her over his cigar.

If they were ever to go, in short, it was high time, with her father’s age, Charlotte’s need of initiation, and the general magnitude of the job of their getting settled and seasoned, their learning to “live into” their queer future — it was high time that they should take up their courage. This was eminent sense, but it didn’t arrest the Princess, who, the next moment, had found a form for her challenge. “But shan’t you then so much as miss her a little? She’s wonderful and beautiful, and I feel somehow as if she were dying. Not really, not physically,” Maggie went on— “she’s so far, naturally, splendid as she is, from having done with life. But dying for us — for you and me; and making us feel it by the very fact of there being so much of her left.”

The Prince smoked hard a minute. “As you say, she’s splendid, but there is — there always will be — much of her left. Only, as you also say, for others.”

“And yet I think,” the Princess returned, “that it isn’t as if we had wholly done with her. How can we not always think of her? It’s as if her unhappiness had been necessary to us — as if we had needed her, at her own cost, to build us up and start us.”

He took it in with consideration, but he met it with a lucid inquiry. “Why do you speak of the unhappiness of your father’s wife?”

They exchanged a long look — the time that it took her to find her reply. “Because not to — !”

“Well, not to — ?”

“Would make me have to speak of him. And I can’t,” said Maggie, “speak of him.”

“You ‘can’t’ — ?”

“I can’t.” She said it as for definite notice, not to be repeated. “There are too many things,” she nevertheless added. “He’s too great.”

The Prince looked at his cigar-tip, and then as he put back the weed: “Too great for whom?” Upon which as she hesitated, “Not, my dear, too great for you,” he declared. “For me — oh, as much as you like.”

“Too great for me is what I mean. I know why I think it,” Maggie said. “That’s enough.”

He looked at her yet again as if she but fanned his wonder; he was on the very point, she judged, of asking her why she thought it. But her own eyes maintained their warning, and at the end of a minute he had uttered other words. “What’s of importance is that you’re his daughter. That at least we’ve got. And I suppose that, if I may say nothing else, I may say at least that I value it.”

“Oh yes, you may say that you value it. I myself make the most of it.”

This again he took in, letting it presently put forth for him a striking connection. “She ought to have known you. That’s what’s present to me. She ought to have understood you better.”

“Better than you did?”

“Yes,” he gravely maintained, “better than I did. And she didn’t really know you at all. She doesn’t know you now.”

“Ah, yes she does!” said Maggie.

But he shook his head — he knew what he meant. “She not only doesn’t understand you more than I, she understands you ever so much less. Though even I — !”

“Well, even you?” Maggie pressed as he paused. “Even I, even I even yet — !” Again he paused and the silence held them.

But Maggie at last broke it. “If Charlotte doesn’t understand me, it is that I’ve prevented her. I’ve chosen to deceive her and to lie to her.”

The Prince kept his eyes on her. “I know what you’ve chosen to do. But I’ve chosen to do the same.”

“Yes,” said Maggie after an instant— “my choice was made when I had guessed yours. But you mean,” she asked, “that she understands YOU?”

“It presents small difficulty!”

“Are you so sure?” Maggie went on.

“Sure enough. But it doesn’t matter.” He waited an instant; then looking up through the fumes of his smoke, “She’s stupid,” he abruptly opined.

“O — oh!” Maggie protested in a long wail.

It had made him in fact quickly change colour. “What I mean is that she’s not, as you pronounce her, unhappy.” And he recovered, with this, all his logic. “Why is she unhappy if she doesn’t know?”

“Doesn’t know — ?” She tried to make his logic difficult.

“Doesn’t know that YOU know.”

It came from him in such a way that she was conscious, instantly, of three or four things to answer. But what she said first was: “Do you think that’s all it need take?” And before he could reply, “She knows, she knows!” Maggie proclaimed.

“Well then, what?”

But she threw back her head, she turned impatiently away from him. “Oh, I needn’t tell you! She knows enough. Besides,” she went on, “she doesn’t believe us.”

It made the Prince stare a little. “Ah, she asks too much!” That drew, however, from his wife another moan of objection, which determined in him a judgment. “She won’t let you take her for unhappy.”

“Oh, I know better than any one else what she won’t let me take her for!”

“Very well,” said Amerigo, “you’ll see.”

“I shall see wonders, I know. I’ve already seen them, and I’m prepared for them.” Maggie recalled — she had memories enough. “It’s terrible” — her memories prompted her to speak. “I see it’s ALWAYS terrible for women.”

The Prince looked down in his gravity. “Everything’s terrible, cara, in the heart of man. She’s making her life,” he said. “She’ll make it.”

His wife turned back upon him; she had wandered to a table, vaguely setting objects straight. “A little by the way then too, while she’s about it, she’s making ours.” At this he raised his eyes, which met her own, and she held him while she delivered herself of some thing that had been with her these last minutes.

“You spoke just now of Charlotte’s not having learned from you that I ‘know.’ Am I to take from you then

that you accept and recognise my knowledge?"

He did the inquiry all the honours — visibly weighed its importance and weighed his response. "You think I might have been showing you that a little more handsomely?"

"It isn't a question of any beauty," said Maggie; "it's only a question of the quantity of truth."

"Oh, the quantity of truth!" the Prince richly, though ambiguously, murmured.

"That's a thing by itself, yes. But there are also such things, all the same, as questions of good faith."

"Of course there are!" the Prince hastened to reply. After which he brought up more slowly: "If ever a man, since the beginning of time, acted in good faith!" But he dropped it, offering it simply for that.

For that then, when it had had time somewhat to settle, like some handful of gold-dust thrown into the air — for that then Maggie showed herself, as deeply and strangely taking it. "I see." And she even wished this form to be as complete as she could make it. "I see."

The completeness, clearly, after an instant, had struck him as divine. "Ah, my dear, my dear, my dear — !" It was all he could say.

She wasn't talking, however, at large. "You've kept up for so long a silence — !"

"Yes, yes, I know what I've kept up. But will you do," he asked, "still one thing more for me?"

It was as if, for an instant, with her new exposure, it had made her turn pale. "Is there even one thing left?"

"Ah, my dear, my dear, my dear!" — it had pressed again in him the fine spring of the unspeakable. There was nothing, however, that the Princess herself couldn't say. "I'll do anything, if you'll tell me what."

"Then wait." And his raised Italian hand, with its play of admonitory fingers, had never made gesture more expressive. His voice itself dropped to a tone — ! "Wait," he repeated. "Wait."

She understood, but it was as if she wished to have it from him. "Till they've been here, you mean?"

"Yes, till they've gone. Till they're away."

She kept it up. "Till they've left the country?" She had her eyes on him for clearness; these were the conditions of a promise — so that he put the promise, practically, into his response. "Till we've ceased to see them — for as long as God may grant! Till we're really alone."

"Oh, if it's only that — !" When she had drawn from him thus then, as she could feel, the thick breath of the definite — which was the intimate, the immediate, the familiar, as she hadn't had them for so long — she turned away again, she put her hand on the knob of the door. But her hand rested at first without a grasp; she had another effort to make, the effort of leaving him, of which everything that had just passed between them, his presence, irresistible, overcharged with it, doubled the difficulty. There was something — she couldn't have told what; it was as if, shut in together, they had come too far — too far for where they were; so that the mere act of her quitting him was like the attempt to recover the lost and gone. She had taken in with her something that, within the ten minutes, and especially within the last three or four, had slipped away from her — which it was vain now, wasn't it? to try to appear to clutch or to pick up. That consciousness in fact had a pang, and she balanced, intensely, for the lingering moment, almost with a terror of her endless power of surrender. He had only to press, really, for her to yield inch by inch, and she fairly knew at present, while she looked at him through her cloud, that the confession of this precious secret sat there for him to pluck. The sensation, for the few seconds, was extraordinary; her weakness, her desire, so long as she was yet not saving herself, flowered in her face like a light or a darkness. She sought for some word that would cover this up; she reverted to the question of tea, speaking as if they shouldn't meet sooner. "Then about five. I count on you."

On him too, however, something had descended; as to which this exactly gave him his chance. "Ah, but I shall see you — ! No?" he said, coming nearer.

She had, with her hand still on the knob, her back against the door, so that her retreat, under his approach must be less than a step, and yet she couldn't for her life, with the other hand, have pushed him away. He was so near now that she could touch him, taste him, smell him, kiss him, hold him; he almost pressed upon her, and the warmth of his face — frowning, smiling, she mightn't know which; only beautiful and strange — was bent upon her with the largeness with which objects loom in dreams. She closed her eyes to it, and so, the next instant, against her purpose, she had put out her hand, which had met his own and which he held. Then it was that, from behind her closed eyes, the right word came. "Wait!" It was the word of his own distress and entreaty, the word for both of them, all they had left, their plank now on the great sea. Their hands were locked, and thus she said it again. "Wait. Wait." She kept her eyes shut, but her hand, she knew, helped her meaning — which after a minute she was aware his own had absorbed. He let her go — he turned away with this message, and when she saw him again his back was presented, as he had left her, and his face staring out

of the window. She had saved herself and she got off.

XLII

Later on, in the afternoon, before the others arrived, the form of their reunion was at least remarkable: they might, in their great eastward drawing-room, have been comparing notes or nerves in apprehension of some stiff official visit. Maggie's mind, in its restlessness, even played a little with the prospect; the high cool room, with its afternoon shade, with its old tapestries uncovered, with the perfect polish of its wide floor reflecting the bowls of gathered flowers and the silver and linen of the prepared tea-table, drew from her a remark in which this whole effect was mirrored, as well as something else in the Prince's movement while he slowly paced and turned. "We're distinctly bourgeois!" she a trifle grimly threw off, as an echo of their old community; though to a spectator sufficiently detached they might have been quite the privileged pair they were reputed, granted only they were taken as awaiting the visit of Royalty. They might have been ready, on the word passed up in advance, to repair together to the foot of the staircase — the Prince somewhat in front, advancing indeed to the open doors and even going down, for all his princedom, to meet, on the stopping of the chariot, the august emergence. The time was stale, it was to be admitted, for incidents of magnitude; the September hush was in full possession, at the end of the dull day, and a couple of the long windows stood open to the balcony that overhung the desolation — the balcony from which Maggie, in the springtime, had seen Amerigo and Charlotte look down together at the hour of her return from the Regent's Park, near by, with her father, the Principino and Miss Bogle. Amerigo now again, in his punctual impatience, went out a couple of times and stood there; after which, as to report that nothing was in sight, he returned to the room with frankly nothing else to do. The Princess pretended to read; he looked at her as he passed; there hovered in her own sense the thought of other occasions when she had cheated appearances of agitation with a book. At last she felt him standing before her, and then she raised her eyes.

"Do you remember how, this morning, when you told me of this event, I asked you if there were anything particular you wished me to do? You spoke of my being at home, but that was a matter of course. You spoke of something else," he went on, while she sat with her book on her knee and her raised eyes; "something that makes me almost wish it may happen. You spoke," he said, "of the possibility of my seeing her alone. Do you know, if that comes," he asked, "the use I shall make of it?" And then as she waited: "The use is all before me."

"Ah, it's your own business now!" said his wife. But it had made her rise.

"I shall make it my own," he answered. "I shall tell her I lied to her."

"Ah no!" she returned.

"And I shall tell her you did."

She shook her head again. "Oh, still less!"

With which therefore they stood at difference, he with his head erect and his happy idea perched, in its eagerness, on his crest. "And how then is she to know?"

"She isn't to know."

"She's only still to think you don't — ?"

"And therefore that I'm always a fool? She may think," said Maggie, "what she likes."

"Think it without my protest — ?"

The Princess made a movement. "What business is it of yours?"

"Isn't it my right to correct her — ?"

Maggie let his question ring — ring long enough for him to hear it himself; only then she took it up. "'Correct' her?" — and it was her own now that really rang. "Aren't you rather forgetting who she is?" After which, while he quite stared for it, as it was the very first clear majesty he had known her to use, she flung down her book and raised a warning hand. "The carriage. Come!"

The "Come!" had matched, for lucid firmness, the rest of her speech, and, when they were below, in the hall, there was a "Go!" for him, through the open doors and between the ranged servants, that matched even that. He received Royalty, bareheaded, therefore, in the persons of Mr. and Mrs. Verver, as it alighted on the pavement, and Maggie was at the threshold to welcome it to her house. Later on, upstairs again, she even herself felt still more the force of the limit of which she had just reminded him; at tea, in Charlotte's affirmed presence — as Charlotte affirmed it — she drew a long breath of richer relief. It was the strangest, once more, of all impressions; but what she most felt, for the half-hour, was that Mr. and Mrs. Verver were making the

occasion easy. They were somehow conjoined in it, conjoined for a present effect as Maggie had absolutely never yet seen them; and there occurred, before long, a moment in which Amerigo's look met her own in recognitions that he couldn't suppress. The question of the amount of correction to which Charlotte had laid herself open rose and hovered, for the instant, only to sink, conspicuously, by its own weight; so high a pitch she seemed to give to the unconsciousness of questions, so resplendent a show of serenity she succeeded in making. The shade of the official, in her beauty and security, never for a moment dropped; it was a cool, high refuge, like the deep, arched recess of some coloured and gilded image, in which she sat and smiled and waited, drank her tea, referred to her husband and remembered her mission. Her mission had quite taken form — it was but another name for the interest of her great opportunity — that of representing the arts and the graces to a people languishing, afar off, in ignorance. Maggie had sufficiently intimated to the Prince, ten minutes before, that she needed no showing as to what their friend wouldn't consent to be taken for; but the difficulty now indeed was to choose, for explicit tribute of admiration, between the varieties of her nobler aspects. She carried it off, to put the matter coarsely, with a taste and a discretion that held our young woman's attention, for the first quarter-of-an-hour, to the very point of diverting it from the attitude of her overshadowed, her almost superseded companion. But Adam Verver profited indeed at this time, even with his daughter, by his so marked peculiarity of seeming on no occasion to have an attitude; and so long as they were in the room together she felt him still simply weave his web and play out his long fine cord, knew herself in presence of this tacit process very much as she had known herself at Fawns. He had a way, the dear man, wherever he was, of moving about the room, noiselessly, to see what it might contain; and his manner of now resorting to this habit, acquainted as he already was with the objects in view, expressed with a certain sharpness the intention of leaving his wife to her devices. It did even more than this; it signified, to the apprehension of the Princess, from the moment she more directly took thought of him, almost a special view of these devices, as actually exhibited in their rarity, together with an independent, a settled appreciation of their general handsome adequacy, which scarcely required the accompaniment of his faint contemplative hum.

Charlotte throned, as who should say, between her hostess and her host, the whole scene having crystallised, as soon as she took her place, to the right quiet lustre; the harmony was not less sustained for being superficial, and the only approach to a break in it was while Amerigo remained standing long enough for his father-in-law, vaguely wondering, to appeal to him, invite or address him, and then, in default of any such word, selected for presentation to the other visitor a plate of petits fours. Maggie watched her husband — if it now could be called watching — offer this refreshment; she noted the consummate way — for "consummate" was the term she privately applied — in which Charlotte cleared her acceptance, cleared her impersonal smile, of any betrayal, any slightest value, of consciousness; and then felt the slow surge of a vision that, at the end of another minute or two, had floated her across the room to where her father stood looking at a picture, an early Florentine sacred subject, that he had given her on her marriage. He might have been, in silence, taking his last leave of it; it was a work for which he entertained, she knew, an unqualified esteem. The tenderness represented for her by his sacrifice of such a treasure had become, to her sense, a part of the whole infusion, of the immortal expression; the beauty of his sentiment looked out at her, always, from the beauty of the rest, as if the frame made positively a window for his spiritual face: she might have said to herself, at this moment, that in leaving the thing behind him, held as in her clasping arms, he was doing the most possible toward leaving her a part of his palpable self. She put her hand over his shoulder, and their eyes were held again, together, by the abiding felicity; they smiled in emulation, vaguely, as if speech failed them through their having passed too far; she would have begun to wonder the next minute if it were reserved to them, for the last stage, to find their contact, like that of old friends reunited too much on the theory of the unchanged, subject to shy lapses.

"It's all right, eh?"

"Oh, my dear — rather!"

He had applied the question to the great fact of the picture, as she had spoken for the picture in reply, but it was as if their words for an instant afterwards symbolised another truth, so that they looked about at everything else to give them this extension. She had passed her arm into his, and the other objects in the room, the other pictures, the sofas, the chairs, the tables, the cabinets, the "important" pieces, supreme in their way, stood out, round them, consciously, for recognition and applause. Their eyes moved together from piece to piece, taking in the whole nobleness — quite as if for him to measure the wisdom of old ideas. The two

noble persons seated, in conversation, at tea, fell thus into the splendid effect and the general harmony: Mrs. Verver and the Prince fairly "placed" themselves, however unwittingly, as high expressions of the kind of human furniture required, esthetically, by such a scene. The fusion of their presence with the decorative elements, their contribution to the triumph of selection, was complete and admirable; though, to a lingering view, a view more penetrating than the occasion really demanded, they also might have figured as concrete attestations of a rare power of purchase. There was much indeed in the tone in which Adam Verver spoke again, and who shall say where his thought stopped? "Le compte y est. You've got some good things."

Maggie met it afresh— "Ah, don't they look well?" Their companions, at the sound of this, gave them, in a spacious intermission of slow talk, an attention, all of gravity, that was like an ampler submission to the general duty of magnificence; sitting as still, to be thus appraised, as a pair of effigies of the contemporary great on one of the platforms of Madame Tussaud. "I'm so glad — for your last look."

With which, after Maggie — quite in the air — had said it, the note was struck indeed; the note of that strange accepted finality of relation, as from couple to couple, which almost escaped an awkwardness only by not attempting a gloss. Yes, this was the wonder, that the occasion defied insistence precisely because of the vast quantities with which it dealt — so that separation was on a scale beyond any compass of parting. To do such an hour justice would have been in some degree to question its grounds — which was why they remained, in fine, the four of them, in the upper air, united in the firmest abstention from pressure. There was no point, visibly, at which, face to face, either Amerigo or Charlotte had pressed; and how little she herself was in danger of doing so Maggie scarce needed to remember. That her father wouldn't, by the tip of a toe — of that she was equally conscious: the only thing was that, since he didn't, she could but hold her breath for what he would do instead. When, at the end of three minutes more, he had said, with an effect of suddenness, "Well, Mag — and the Principino?" it was quite as if that were, by contrast, the hard, the truer voice.

She glanced at the clock. "I 'ordered' him for half-past five — which hasn't yet struck. Trust him, my dear, not to fail you!"

"Oh, I don't want HIM to fail me!" was Mr. Verver's reply; yet uttered in so explicitly jocose a relation to the possibilities of failure that even when, just afterwards, he wandered in his impatience to one of the long windows and passed out to the balcony, she asked herself but for a few seconds if reality, should she follow him, would overtake or meet her there. She followed him of necessity — it came, absolutely, so near to his inviting her, by stepping off into temporary detachment, to give the others something of the chance that she and her husband had so fantastically discussed. Beside him then, while they hung over the great dull place, clear and almost coloured now, coloured with the odd, sad, pictured, "old-fashioned" look that empty London streets take on in waning afternoons of the summer's end, she felt once more how impossible such a passage would have been to them, how it would have torn them to pieces, if they had so much as suffered its suppressed relations to peep out of their eyes. This danger would doubtless indeed have been more to be reckoned with if the instinct of each — she could certainly at least answer for her own — had not so successfully acted to trump up other apparent connexions for it, connexions as to which they could pretend to be frank.

"You mustn't stay on here, you know," Adam Verver said as a result of his unobstructed outlook. "Fawns is all there for you, of course — to the end of my tenure. But Fawns so dismantled," he added with mild ruefulness, "Fawns with half its contents, and half its best things, removed, won't seem to you, I'm afraid, particularly lively."

"No," Maggie answered, "we should miss its best things. Its best things, my dear, have certainly been removed. To be back there," she went on, "to be back there — !" And she paused for the force of her idea.

"Oh, to be back there without anything good — !" But she didn't hesitate now; she brought her idea forth. "To be back there without Charlotte is more than I think would do." And as she smiled at him with it, so she saw him the next instant take it — take it in a way that helped her smile to pass all for an allusion to what she didn't and couldn't say. This quantity was too clear — that she couldn't at such an hour be pretending to name to him what it was, as he would have said, "going to be," at Fawns or anywhere else, to want for HIM. That was now — and in a manner exaltedly, sublimely — out of their compass and their question; so that what was she doing, while they waited for the Principino, while they left the others together and their tension just sensibly threatened, what was she doing but just offer a bold but substantial substitute? Nothing was stranger moreover, under the action of Charlotte's presence, than the fact of a felt sincerity in her words. She felt her sincerity absolutely sound — she gave it for all it might mean. "Because Charlotte, dear, you know,"

she said, “is incomparable.” It took thirty seconds, but she was to know when these were over that she had pronounced one of the happiest words of her life. They had turned from the view of the street; they leaned together against the balcony rail, with the room largely in sight from where they stood, but with the Prince and Mrs. Verver out of range. Nothing he could try, she immediately saw, was to keep his eyes from lighting; not even his taking out his cigarette-case and saying before he said anything else: “May I smoke?” She met it, for encouragement, with her “My dear!” again, and then, while he struck his match, she had just another minute to be nervous — a minute that she made use of, however, not in the least to falter, but to reiterate with a high ring, a ring that might, for all she cared, reach the pair inside: “Father, father — Charlotte’s great!”

It was not till after he had begun to smoke that he looked at her. “Charlotte’s great.”

They could close upon it — such a basis as they might immediately feel it make; and so they stood together over it, quite gratefully, each recording to the other’s eyes that it was firm under their feet. They had even thus a renewed wait, as for proof of it; much as if he were letting her see, while the minutes lapsed for their concealed companions, that this was finally just why — but just WHY! “You see,” he presently added, “how right I was. Right, I mean, to do it for you.”

“Ah, rather!” she murmured with her smile. And then, as to be herself ideally right: “I don’t see what you would have done without her.”

“The point was,” he returned quietly, “that I didn’t see what you were to do. Yet it was a risk.”

“It was a risk,” said Maggie— “but I believed in it. At least for myself!” she smiled.

“Well NOW,” he smoked, “we see.”

“We see.”

“I know her better.”

“You know her best.”

“Oh, but naturally!” On which, as the warranted truth of it hung in the air — the truth warranted, as who should say, exactly by the present opportunity to pronounce, this opportunity created and accepted — she found herself lost, though with a finer thrill than she had perhaps yet known, in the vision of all he might mean. The sense of it in her rose higher, rose with each moment that he invited her thus to see him linger; and when, after a little more, he had said, smoking again and looking up, with head thrown back and hands spread on the balcony rail, at the grey, gaunt front of the house, “She’s beautiful, beautiful!” her sensibility reported to her the shade of a new note. It was all she might have wished, for it was, with a kind of speaking competence, the note of possession and control; and yet it conveyed to her as nothing till now had done the reality of their parting. They were parting, in the light of it, absolutely on Charlotte’s VALUE — the value that was filling the room out of which they had stepped as if to give it play, and with which the Prince, on his side, was perhaps making larger acquaintance. If Maggie had desired, at so late an hour, some last conclusive comfortable category to place him in for dismissal, she might have found it here in its all coming back to his ability to rest upon high values. Somehow, when all was said, and with the memory of her gifts, her variety, her power, so much remained of Charlotte’s! What else had she herself meant three minutes before by speaking of her as great? Great for the world that was before her — that he proposed she should be: she was not to be wasted in the application of his plan. Maggie held to this then — that she wasn’t to be wasted. To let his daughter know it he had sought this brief privacy. What a blessing, accordingly, that she could speak her joy in it! His face, meanwhile, at all events, was turned to her, and as she met his eyes again her joy went straight. “It’s success, father.”

“It’s success. And even this,” he added as the Principino, appearing alone, deep within, piped across an instant greeting— “even this isn’t altogether failure!”

They went in to receive the boy, upon whose introduction to the room by Miss Bogle Charlotte and the Prince got up — seemingly with an impressiveness that had caused Miss Bogle not to give further effect to her own entrance. She had retired, but the Principino’s presence, by itself, sufficiently broke the tension — the subsidence of which, in the great room, ten minutes later, gave to the air something of the quality produced by the cessation of a sustained rattle. Stillness, when the Prince and Princess returned from attending the visitors to their carriage, might have been said to be not so much restored as created; so that whatever next took place in it was foredoomed to remarkable salience. That would have been the case even with so natural, though so futile, a movement as Maggie’s going out to the balcony again to follow with her eyes her father’s departure. The carriage was out of sight — it had taken her too long solemnly to reascend, and she looked awhile only at the great grey space, on which, as on the room still more, the shadow of dusk

had fallen. Here, at first, her husband had not rejoined her; he had come up with the boy, who, clutching his hand, abounded, as usual, in remarks worthy of the family archives; but the two appeared then to have proceeded to report to Miss Bogle. It meant something for the Princess that her husband had thus got their son out of the way, not bringing him back to his mother; but everything now, as she vaguely moved about, struck her as meaning so much that the unheard chorus swelled. Yet THIS above all — her just being there as she was and waiting for him to come in, their freedom to be together there always — was the meaning most disengaged: she stood in the cool twilight and took in, all about her, where it lurked, her reason for what she had done. She knew at last really why — and how she had been inspired and guided, how she had been persistently able, how, to her soul, all the while, it had been for the sake of this end. Here it was, then, the moment, the golden fruit that had shone from afar; only, what were these things, in the fact, for the hand and for the lips, when tested, when tasted — what were they as a reward? Closer than she had ever been to the measure of her course and the full face of her act, she had an instant of the terror that, when there has been suspense, always precedes, on the part of the creature to be paid, the certification of the amount. Amerigo knew it, the amount; he still held it, and the delay in his return, making her heart beat too fast to go on, was like a sudden blinding light on a wild speculation. She had thrown the dice, but his hand was over her cast.

He opened the door, however, at last — he hadn't been away ten minutes; and then, with her sight of him renewed to intensity, she seemed to have a view of the number. His presence alone, as he paused to look at her, somehow made it the highest, and even before he had spoken she had begun to be paid in full. With that consciousness, in fact, an extraordinary thing occurred; the assurance of her safety so making her terror drop that already, within the minute, it had been changed to concern for his own anxiety, for everything that was deep in his being and everything that was fair in his face. So far as seeing that she was "paid" went, he might have been holding out the money-bag for her to come and take it. But what instantly rose, for her, between the act and her acceptance was the sense that she must strike him as waiting for a confession. This, in turn, charged her with a new horror: if that was her proper payment she would go without money. His acknowledgment hung there, too monstrously, at the expense of Charlotte, before whose mastery of the greater style she had just been standing dazzled. All she now knew, accordingly, was that she should be ashamed to listen to the uttered word; all, that is, but that she might dispose of it on the spot forever.

"Isn't she too splendid?" she simply said, offering it to explain and to finish.

"Oh, splendid!" With which he came over to her.

"That's our help, you see," she added — to point further her moral.

It kept him before her therefore, taking in — or trying to — what she so wonderfully gave. He tried, too clearly, to please her — to meet her in her own way; but with the result only that, close to her, her face kept before him, his hands holding her shoulders, his whole act enclosing her, he presently echoed: "'See'? I see nothing but you." And the truth of it had, with this force, after a moment, so strangely lighted his eyes that, as for pity and dread of them, she buried her own in his breast.

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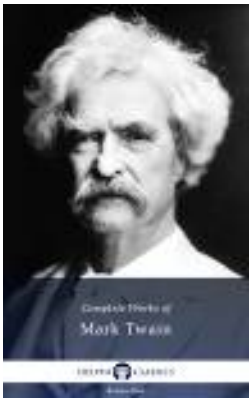

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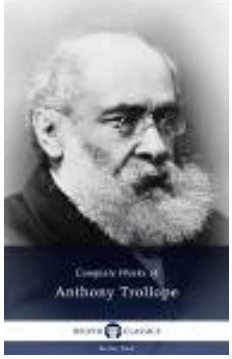

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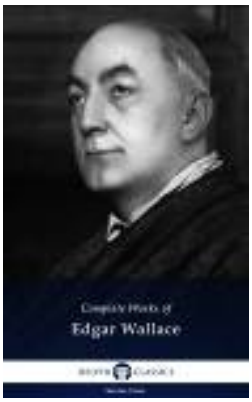

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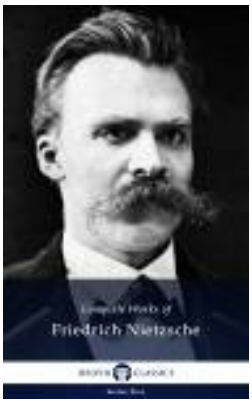

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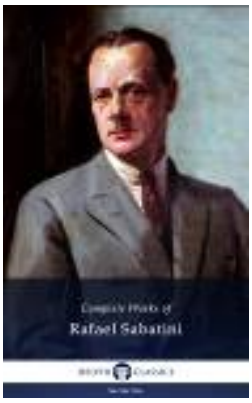

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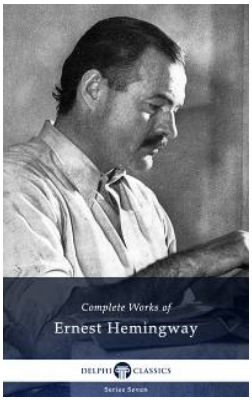

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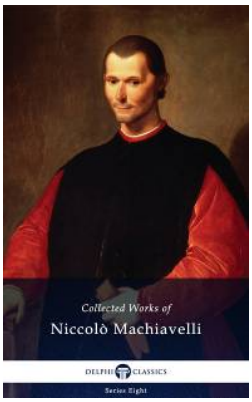

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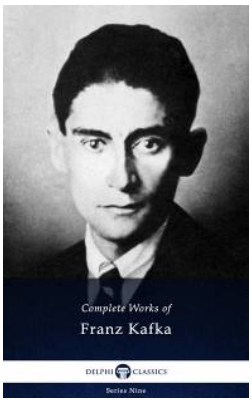

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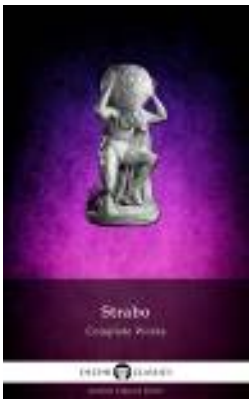

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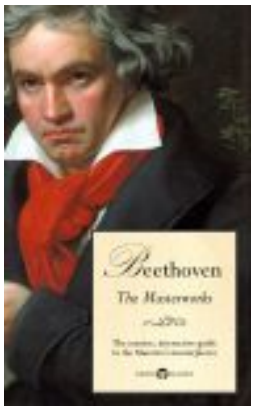

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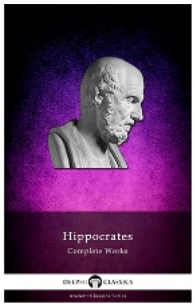

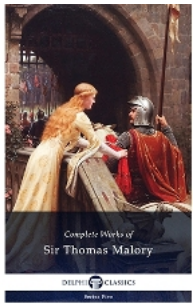

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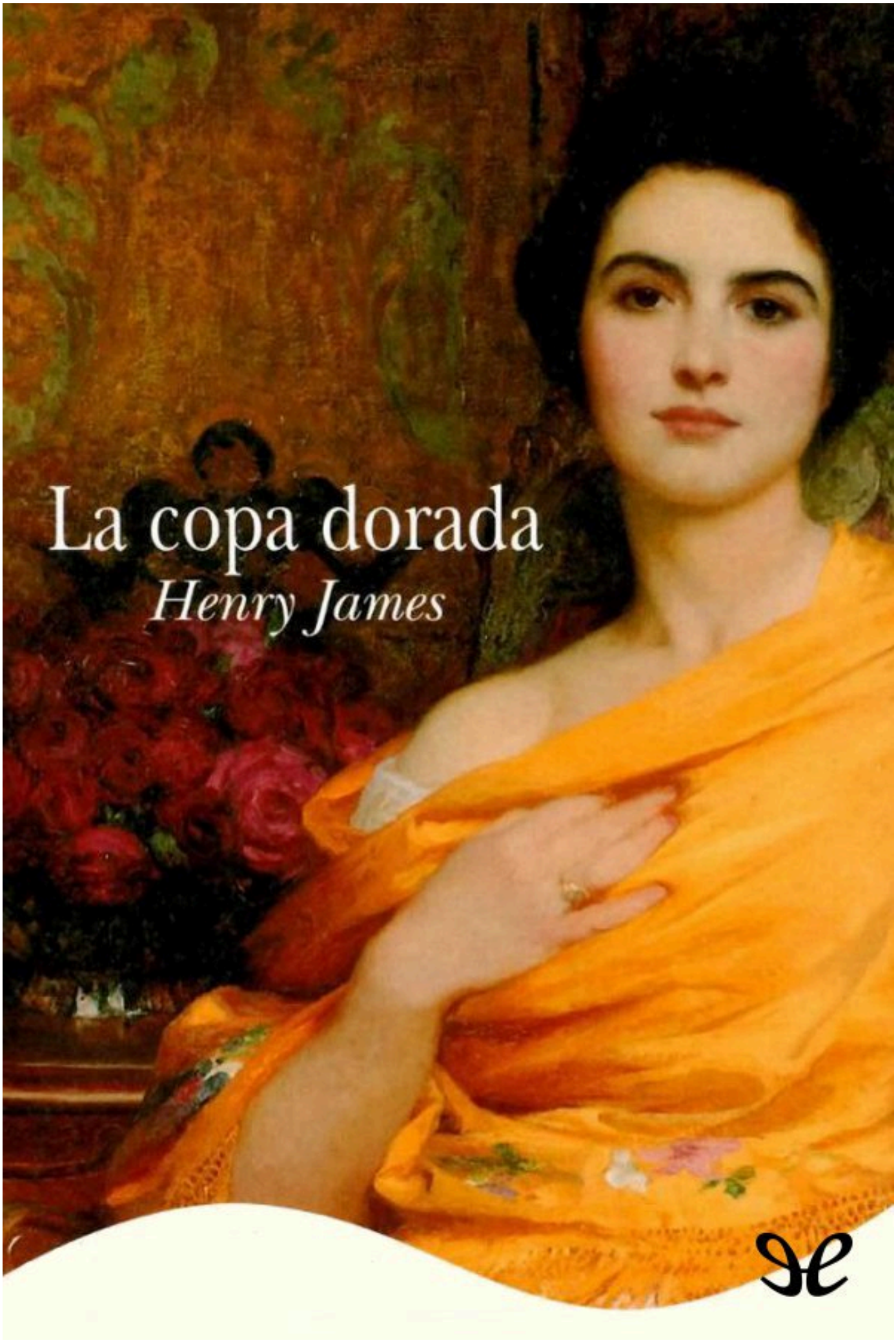
La copa dorada
Henry James

Maggie Verver y su padre viudo, Adam, son dos norteamericanos residentes en Londres, dedicados a la vida de ocio refinado que la inmensa fortuna de Adam les permite. Maggie vuelve a encontrarse con su amiga Charlotte, bella y culta, pero sin dinero, y mediante unos amigos, el matrimonio Assingham, conoce a Americo, un príncipe italiano de rancio abolengo pero también sin medios de subsistencia. Padre e hija deciden casarse, y sus respectivas parejas serán la joven Charlotte y el príncipe Americo, sin saber que ambos han sido amantes en el pasado.

Adam y Maggie continúan la misma vida de antes, haciéndose compañía y coleccionando obras de arte, a pesar de que ahora tienen otro vínculo que atender. Charlotte y Americo vuelven a ser amantes, pero Maggie comienza a sospechar de ambos, y una visita accidental a una tienda de antigüedades le proporcionará la prueba. En ella compra la copa dorada, un objeto de lujo que Charlotte quería haber regalado a Americo antes de que ambos contrajeran matrimonio, pero que éste rechazó por tener una fisura.

Maggie comienza a desplegar una estrategia muy sutil para separar a los dos amantes. Hace frente a Americo y Charlotte, pero sin revelar que tiene pruebas de su adulterio, y poco a poco convence a su padre para que regrese a Estados Unidos con su mujer. La novela termina con Adam y Charlotte a punto de embarcar de regreso a su país.

Henry James

La copa dorada

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Libro primero

El Príncipe

Primera parte

Capítulo I

Cuando pensaba en ello, el Príncipe se daba cuenta de que Londres siempre le había gustado. El Príncipe era uno de esos romanos modernos que encuentran junto a las orillas del Támesis una imagen más convincente de la fidelidad del antiguo estado que la que habían dejado junto a las orillas del Tíber. Formado en la leyenda de aquella ciudad a la que el mundo entero rendía tributo, veía en el actual Londres, mucho más que en la contemporánea Roma, la verdadera dimensión del concepto de Estado. Se decía el Príncipe que, si se trataba de una cuestión de *Imperium*, y si uno quería, como romano, recobrar un poco ese sentido, el lugar al que debía ir era al Puente de Londres y, mejor aún, si era en una hermosa tarde de mayo, al Hyde Park Corner. Sin embargo, a ninguno de estos dos lugares, al parecer centros de su predilección, había guiado sus pasos en el momento en que le encontramos, sino que había ido a parar, lisa y llanamente, a Bond Street, en donde su imaginación, propicia ahora a ejercicios de alcance relativamente corto, le inducía a detenerse de vez en cuando ante los escaparates en los que se exhibían objetos pesados y macizos, en oro y plata, en formas aptas para llevar piedras preciosas o en cuero, hierro, bronce, destinados a cien usos y abusos, tan apretados como si fueran, en su imperial insolencia, el botín de victorias alcanzadas en lejanos pagos. Sin embargo, los movimientos del joven Príncipe en manera alguna revelaban atención, ni siquiera cuando se detenía al vislumbrar algunos rostros que pasaban por la calle junto a él bajo la sombra de grandes sombreros con cintajos, u otros todavía más delicadamente matizados por las tensas sombrillas de seda, sostenidas de manera que quedaban con una intencionada inclinación, casi perversa, en los coches del tipo victoria que esperaban junto a la acera. Los vagos pensamientos del Príncipe eran no poco sintomáticos, por cuanto a pesar de que la época de veraneo había comenzado ya, y con ello a menguar la densidad del tránsito en las calles, se percibían rostros, en esta tarde de agosto, con posibilidades propias de aquel escenario. No obstante, la verdad es que el Príncipe se sentía inquieto hasta el punto de no poder concentrarse, y la última idea que se le hubiera ocurrido entonces hubiese sido la de emprender una persecución, fuera cual fuere su naturaleza.

En el curso de los últimos seis meses, el Príncipe había estado empeñado en una persecución como jamás lo había estado en su vida y esto era lo que le tenía alterado ahora, en el momento en que nos fijamos en él, la idea de justificar su empeño. La captura había sido el premio a su persecución, o, como él mismo habría podido expresar: el éxito había sido el precio de la virtud. Por eso, la fijeza de su pensamiento en este asunto le había puesto de un humor más serio que alegre. Una expresión de austeridad, que hubiera podido confundirse con la de fracaso, cubría su rostro bien parecido, grave y de líneas sólidas y regulares, aunque, al mismo tiempo, extraño por sus ojos azules, el bigote castaño oscuro y unos rasgos, tan levemente «extranjeros» desde el punto de vista inglés, que quizás hubieran motivado el comentario, superficialmente halagador, de que parecía un irlandés «refinado». Lo que había ocurrido era que poco antes, a las tres de la tarde, el destino del Príncipe había quedado marcado casi irremisiblemente y que, aunque pretendiera luchar contra él, se daba una gravedad parecida a la que se produce cuando después de cerrar con la más fuerte cerradura que imaginarse pueda, la llave queda trabada en ella. Nada cabía hacer todavía, salvo pensar en lo que se había hecho ya. Y esto era lo que nuestro personaje pensaba mientras paseaba sin rumbo. Equivalía a haberse casado, habida cuenta del carácter definitivo con que los abogados, a las tres de la tarde, habían permitido que se fijara la fecha de la boda, ahora ya tan cercana. A las ocho y media en

punto, cenaría con la señorita en cuya representación, y en la de su padre, los abogados londinenses habían llegado a un acuerdo inspiradamente armonioso con el representante del Príncipe, el pobre Calderoni, recién llegado de Roma. Éste se hallaba ahora en el extraño trance de que el señor Verver en persona le enseñara Londres, antes de partir a toda prisa camino de Roma. Sí, el propio señor Verver, que tan poca importancia daba a sus millones y que, en los acuerdos prematrimoniales, en nada había influido para imponer el principio de reciprocidad. Y la reciprocidad que más sorprendía al Príncipe en esos momentos era la que consistía en que el señor Verver obsequiara con su compañía a Calderoni, para enseñarle los leones enjaulados. Si algo había en el mundo que el joven Príncipe se propusiera en el momento presente era ser mucho más digno y decente, en su calidad de yerno, de lo que lo habían sido, como tales, gran número de sus amigos. Pensaba en aquellos amigos de los que él tanto se diferenciaría, en idioma inglés. Mentalmente, utilizaba términos ingleses para expresar esas diferencias, porque, debido a estar familiarizado con esta lengua desde sus más tiernos años, no hallaba en ella el más leve rastro de barbarismo, ni al oído ni a la lengua, y le parecía cómoda en la vida para gran número de relaciones. Y, cosa rara, también la encontraba cómoda para hablar consigo mismo, aun cuando no olvidaba que, con el paso del tiempo, podían dársele otras relaciones entre las que cabria incluir una más íntima gradación de esa relación consigo mismo, en la que utilizaría, posiblemente con violencia, el instrumento más grande o más afinado —¿cuál de las dos características?— de su lengua materna. La señorita Verver le había dicho que hablaba demasiado bien el inglés y que éste era su único defecto, pero el Príncipe hubiera sido incapaz de hablar peor esa lengua, ni siquiera para complacer a la señorita Verver. El Príncipe había dicho:

—Cuando quiero hablar mal, hablo en francés.

Con esto insinuaba que había ocasiones, generalmente propicias a la injuria, en las que el francés era el idioma más adecuado. La muchacha dio a entender al Príncipe que estimaba que estas palabras no suponían más que un comentario acerca del francés, idioma que ella hablaba y que siempre había deseado hablar bien o, por lo menos, mejor. Y además, que había puesto de manifiesto su evidente convencimiento de que el uso del francés exigía una inteligencia que ella jamás llegaría a poseer. Él dio respuesta a estas palabras —respuesta afable y encantadora, como todas las que la otra parte contratante había recibido del Príncipe en los acuerdos del día de hoy— diciendo que se dedicaba a practicar el norteamericano, a fin de poder conversar en igualdad de condiciones, valga la expresión, con el señor Verver. Su futuro suegro, dijo, dominaba de tal manera el norteamericano que él siempre quedaba en desventaja cuando hablaban. Además, el Príncipe había hecho a la muchacha una observación que la conmovió más que ninguna otra de las suyas.

—Tu padre es un verdadero *galantuomo*, sin la menor duda. En este aspecto hay muchos falsarios. Estoy convencido de que tu padre es el hombre más bueno que he conocido en mi vida.

La muchacha respondió alegremente a estas palabras:

—¿Hay alguna razón para dudarlo?

Fue precisamente esta pregunta la que indujo al Príncipe a pensar. Las realidades, o por lo menos muchas de las realidades que hacían que el señor Verver fuera como era, parecían demostrar la falsedad de otras realidades que, en el caso de otras personas que el Príncipe conocía, no habían producido el mismo resultado. El Príncipe repuso:

—El estilo de tu padre puede suscitar dudas.

La chica no había pensado en esto.

—¿El estilo de papá? No tiene.

—Efectivamente, no tiene ni estilo. Ni siquiera el tuyo. Riéndose, la muchacha observó:

—Muchas gracias por el «ni siquiera».

—¡Querida, tu estilo es maravilloso! Pero tu padre tiene su propio estilo. He podido advertirlo. No lo dudes, lo tiene. Y lo más importante es que ese estilo es el que le ha hecho destacar.

En este punto, nuestra muchacha se mostró en desacuerdo:

—Su bondad es lo que le ha hecho destacar.

—Querida, a mi juicio, la bondad jamás ha hecho destacar a nadie. La verdadera bondad es, precisamente, lo que impide destacar a la gente.

Esta distinción hecha por él mismo le interesó y divirtió, y añadió:

—No. Se debe a su estilo, que le pertenece sólo a él.

La muchacha, dudando todavía, dijo:

—Es el estilo norteamericano. Nada más.

—Exactamente. Esto es todo. Es un estilo que le cuadra, y en consecuencia ha de ser bueno a determinados efectos.

Sonriendo, Maggie Verver le preguntó:

—¿Crees que sería bueno para ti?

La respuesta que el Príncipe dio a esta pregunta fue la más feliz que podía dar:

—Si realmente quieres saberlo, querida, y teniendo en cuenta cómo soy, creo que no hay nada que pueda perjudicarme o beneficiarme, y esto tendrás ocasión de comprobarlo. Puedes decir, si quieres, que soy un *galantuomo*, de lo cual albergo fervientes esperanzas, aunque, en realidad, se me puede comparar con un pollo, en el mejor de los casos, troceado y con salsa, o transformado en *crême de volaille*, sin la mitad de las partes. Tu padre, por el contrario, es el ave al natural, correteando por la *basse cour*. Sus plumas, sus movimientos, los sonidos que emite, todo esto son las partes que, en mi caso, faltan.

—¡Menos mal, porque los pollos vivos no se pueden comer!

Estas palabras no enojaron al Príncipe, a pesar de lo cual les dio una enérgica respuesta:

—Bueno, la verdad es que estoy comiéndome vivo a tu padre, que es la única manera de saborearlo. Y quiero seguir haciéndolo, porque como quiera que, cuando habla en norteamericano, es cuando más vivo está, debo cultivar su manera de hablar, para seguir gozando. Tu padre jamás conseguiría formar a otro hombre parecido a él, en ningún otro idioma.

Poco importaba que la muchacha siguiera remisa a dar la razón al Príncipe, pues su renuencia no era más que fruto del placer que sentía:

—Pues yo creo que mi padre podría conseguir que te parecieras a él, en chino.

—Sería un trabajo innecesario. Quiero decir que tu padre es el resultado inevitable de un gran carácter. En consecuencia, lo que me gusta es ese carácter que ha hecho posible la existencia de una persona como tu padre.

Riendo, la muchacha observó:

—Pues tendrás sobradas ocasiones de oírlo antes de acabar con nosotros.

Éstas fueron las únicas palabras que verdaderamente consiguieron hacer que el Príncipe frunciera el entrecejo.

—Por favor, ¿qué quieres decir con «acabar con nosotros»?

—Hasta que nos conozcas totalmente.

El Príncipe pudo contestar como si se tratara de una chanza:

—Mi amor, ya he comenzado a hacerlo. A mi juicio, ya os conozco lo suficiente para no sorprenderme jamás de nada.

Después de una pausa, prosiguió:

—Vosotros sois quienes no sabéis nada. Consto de dos partes.

Sí, hasta este punto la muchacha había inducido al Príncipe a hablar. Continuó:

—Una de las dos partes es consecuencia de la Historia, de los hechos, los matrimonios, los crímenes, las locuras, las *bêtises* sin límites de otras personas; principalmente es el resultado del indignante derroche de dinero que hubiera debido ir a parar a mis manos. Estos hechos constan por escrito en libros que llenan literalmente estanterías enteras en las bibliotecas y son tan conocidos como abominables. Cualquiera puede conocerlos, y vosotros dos habéis sabido enfrentaros a ellos cara a cara, lo que me parece maravilloso. Pero hay otra cosa, mucho más pequeña, que, sin la menor duda y a pesar de ser pequeña, representa mi individualidad, mi calidad personal desconocida y carente de importancia —carente de importancia para todos salvo para vosotros—. De esta parte, nada habéis descubierto.

Valerosamente, la muchacha había contestado:

—Afortunadamente, querido; de lo contrario, ¿adónde iría a parar la prometida ocupación de mi futuro?

Incluso ahora, el joven Príncipe recordaba lo extraordinariamente diáfano —de ninguna otra manera podía calificarlo— y bello que era el aspecto de la muchacha, cuando dijo estas palabras. También recordaba que, sinceramente, le había contestado:

—Ya sabes que los reinados más felices son los reinados sin historia. Convencida de la verdad de sus palabras, la muchacha observó:

—¡La historia no me da miedo! Si quieres, puedes llamarla la parte mala.

Ahora bien, tu historia se te nota a la legua.

Y Maggie Verver también dijo:

—Si no, ¿qué crees que me indujo a fijarme en ti, al principio? No fue, como supongo que notaste, eso

que llamas tu calidad personal, tu individual personalidad. Fueron las generaciones que llevas detrás, las locuras y los crímenes, los expolios y los derroches, aquel perverso papa, el más monstruoso de todos, al que tantos volúmenes de tu biblioteca familiar están dedicados. Ya he leído dos o tres, y pienso dedicarme a leer cuantos pueda, tan pronto tenga tiempo.

Luego, la muchacha había insistido:

—¿Y dónde estarías tú, sin tus archivos, tus anales y tus infamias?

Ahora, el Príncipe recordaba la grave contestación que había dado a esta pregunta:

—Quizá estuviera en una situación pecuniaria un tanto mejor.

Pero su actual situación, en el aspecto mencionado, importaba tan poco a los Verver que el Príncipe había tenido oportunidades más que suficientes para percatarse de ello, hasta tal punto en su propia ventaja, que ahora no recordaba la contestación que la muchacha le había dado, aunque sí le constaba que había endulzado las aguas en que él flotaba, las había perfumado cual una esencia escanciada de un tarro con boca de oro, para dar aroma a las aguas en que se bañaba. Nadie, antes que él, ni siquiera el infame papa, había estado sumergido hasta el cuello en semejantes aguas. Lo cual venía a demostrar cuán difícil era, a fin de cuentas, que un miembro de su linaje pudiera hurtarse a la historia. ¿Ya qué se debía, sino a la historia, sí, a su especial historia, la seguridad de disfrutar de más dinero todavía que aquel en que el mismísimo constructor del palacio había soñado? Éste era el elemento que hacía flotar al Príncipe, sobre el que Maggie esparcía de vez en cuando gotas que le daban color. ¿De qué color, entre tantos como hay en el mundo? ¿De qué color, si no, era el de la extraordinaria buena fe norteamericana? Era del color de la inocencia de Maggie y, al mismo tiempo, de la imaginación de la muchacha. Éste era el color que impregnaba íntegramente su relación, la relación del Príncipe con los Verver. Lo que el Príncipe había dicho a continuación lo recordaba ahora, en este momento en que le hemos sorprendido recogiendo los ecos de sus propios pensamientos mientras pasea, ocioso. Y le viene a la memoria debido a que sus palabras fueron la voz de su buena suerte, el tranquilizante sonido que siempre le acompañaba:

—Vosotros, los norteamericanos, sois casi increíblemente románticos.

—Claro que sí. Y a esto se debe precisamente que todo sea tan agradable para nosotros.

El Príncipe preguntó:

—¿Todo?

—Bueno, todo lo que es agradable, por poco que lo sea. El mundo, el hermoso mundo, y todo lo que hay en él que sea hermoso. Quiero decir que tenemos esta visión.

El Príncipe la había mirado durante unos instantes, con claro conocimiento de lo mucho que la muchacha le había impresionado en lo tocante al mundo, considerándolo una realidad hermosa, una de las más hermosas realidades. Pero el Príncipe le había dado la siguiente contestación:

—Veis demasiado, y esto es precisamente lo que a veces os crea dificultades.

Una breve reflexión le indujo a matizar estas palabras:

—Salvo cuando veis demasiado poco.

Pero el Príncipe consideró que había comprendido bien el significado de las palabras de la muchacha y estimó que quizá su advertencia había sido innecesaria. Había sido testigo de las locuras del carácter romántico, pero, al parecer, en el romanticismo de los Verver no se daban locuras, sino que era preciso reconocer que éste sólo les reportaba inocentes placeres, placeres de castigo. Sus goces constituían un tributo al prójimo, sin que ello les comportara ninguna pérdida.

Sin embargo, lo más gracioso, manifestó respetuosamente, era que el padre de la muchacha, a pesar de ser mayor y más sabio y, además, hombre, era tan insensato, o tan sensato, como su propia hija.

La muchacha, al escuchar semejantes palabras, había declarado inmediatamente:

—¡Oh, es mucho mejor que yo! ¡Bueno, o mucho peor! Sus relaciones con las cosas que le importan, y esto me parece hermoso, son absolutamente románticas. Por esto, su vida aquí, considerada íntegramente, es la cosa más romántica que he visto en mi vida.

—¿Te refieres a la idea que tiene de su tierra natal?

—Sí, y a su colección, y al museo que desea construir para alojarla, que, como sabes, es lo que más le importa en el mundo. Es la obra de su vida y el motivo de todos sus actos.

El joven Príncipe, en su estado de humor actual, hubiera podido sonreír, sonreír delicadamente, tal como antes había sonreído a la muchacha; y le dijo:

—¿Y el museo ha sido lo que le ha inducido a aceptarme como yerno?

—Sí, querido, sin la menor duda. O, por lo menos, en cierta medida. Mi padre no nació en American

City, pues, a pesar de que no es viejo, la ciudad es joven comparada con él. Mi padre comenzó a trabajar en ella, le tiene cariño, y la ciudad ha crecido, como dice mi padre, igual que el programa de una función teatral benéfica.

A continuación, la chica explicó:

—De todas maneras, tú formas parte de su colección, eras una de esas cosas que sólo aquí se pueden conseguir. Un objeto raro, bello, caro. Quizá no seas absolutamente único, pero eres un ser tan curioso, tan notable, que hay muy pocos que se te parezcan. Perteneces a una clase de la que todo se conoce. Eres lo que se llama un *morceau de musée*.

El Príncipe se arriesgó a comentar:

—Comprendo, es igual que si llevara un gran cartel que dijera que cuesto mucho dinero.

Con gravedad, la muchacha repuso:

—No tengo la menor idea de tu precio.

Y, en aquel momento, al Príncipe le gustó inmensamente el modo en que dijo estas palabras. Incluso se sintió, por el momento, vulgar. Pero sacó el máximo partido a las palabras de la muchacha:

—¿No crees que lo averiguarías, si llegara el momento de prescindir de mí? En ese caso, mi valor sería objeto de estimación.

La muchacha le dirigió una deliciosa mirada, como si el valor del Príncipe estuviera allí, a la vista, y contestó:

—Sí, siempre y cuando se tratara de pagar para no perderte.

Y he aquí lo que estas palabras indujeron al Príncipe a decir:

—No hables de mí. A fin de cuentas, eres tú quien no pertenece al tiempo presente. Eres un ser perteneciente a una época más valerosa y más bella; el Cinquecento, en su momento más áureo, no se hubiera avergonzado de ti. Y sí de mí, hasta tal punto que, si no hubiera visto algunas de las piezas adquiridas por tu padre, temería las críticas que hicieran de mí los especialistas de American City.

A continuación, había preguntado, no sin aprensión:

—De todas maneras, ¿no se te habrá ocurrido mandarme a American City para mayor seguridad?

—Bueno, quizá nos veamos obligados a ir.

—Contigo iría a cualquier sitio.

—Ya veremos. Todo depende de si nos vemos obligados a ir. Hay algunos objetos que mi padre mantiene apartados, son los objetos más grandes, los de más difícil manejo, y estos objetos los tiene almacenados, formando grandes grupos, aquí, en París, en Italia, en España, en almacenes, en sótanos, en bancos, en cajas fuertes, en maravillosos sitios secretos… Nos hemos portado como un par de piratas, como auténticos piratas de comedia, esa clase de piratas que se intercambian un guiño y exclaman: «¡Ajá!», cuando llegan al punto en que tienen escondido el tesoro. El nuestro está escondido un poco en todas partes, salvo aquellos objetos que nos gusta ver, los objetos con los que viajamos, los que tenemos a nuestro alrededor. Éstos, que son los más pequeños, son los que sacamos y disponemos lo mejor que podemos, los que llevamos a los hoteles en que nos alojamos y a aquellas casas que alquilamos para hacerlas menos feas. Desde luego, estos objetos corren peligro, y tenemos que vigilarlos. Pero a papá le gustan las cosas bellas, le gusta, como dice él, lo bueno que hay en ellas, y con tal de gozar de su compañía acepta los riesgos consiguientes.

Después de una pausa, Maggie observó con énfasis:

—Hemos tenido una suerte extraordinaria, no hemos perdido nada todavía. Los objetos más bellos a menudo son los más pequeños. En muchos casos, como bien sabes, el valor no guarda ninguna relación con el tamaño.

Maggie concluyó:

—Pero no hemos perdido nada, ni siquiera la pieza más pequeña. Riendo, el Príncipe dijo:

—¡Me gusta la clasificación que me has dado! Yo seré una de esas piezas menudas que sacas de la maleta y pones entre las fotografías de la familia y los semanarios recién comprados en un hotel, o, en el peor de los casos, en una casa alquilada, maravillosa como ésta en la que nos encontramos. Pero, al parecer, no soy un objeto de tan gran tamaño que exija ser enterrado.

—Querido, no te enterrarán hasta después de haber muerto. A no ser que, a tu juicio, ir a American City equivalga a estar enterrado.

—Antes de llegar a conclusión alguna a este respecto, sería preciso que viera mi tumba.

De esta manera, y siguiendo lo que era inveterado en él, el Príncipe dijo la última palabra en aquella

conversación. Pero volvió cierta observación que había acudido a sus labios al principio y que había retenido:

—Tanto si soy bueno, como malo o indiferente, creo que hay en mí una cosa en la que tienes fe.

Estas palabras habían tenido un tono solemne, incluso a los oídos del propio Príncipe, pero la muchacha las interpretó alegremente:

—¡Por favor, no me limites a «una» cosa! Querido, son muchas las cosas que hay en ti en las que tengo fe, de manera que unas cuantas seguirán suscitando mi fe, aunque la mayoría queden hechas cisco. Y ya me he ocupado de este problema. He dividido mi fe en compartimentos estancos. ¡Debemos hacer lo preciso para no hundirnos!

—¿Realmente crees que no soy hipócrita? ¿Reconoces que no miento, ni finjo, ni engaño? ¿Está protegida esa creencia en el interior de un compartimento estanco?

Estas preguntas, a las que había dado cierto énfasis, habían hecho, recordaba ahora el Príncipe, que Maggie le mirara fijamente durante unos instantes y que subiera un tanto el color de su rostro, como si las palabras hubieran resultado todavía más extrañas de lo que él se había propuesto. Advirtió inmediatamente que toda conversación seria centrada en la veracidad, en la lealtad o en la carencia de una y otra, cogía desprevenida a Maggie como si no estuviera preparada para hablar de estos asuntos. El Príncipe ya había reparado anteriormente en ello. Era el síntoma inglés y norteamericano indicativo de que el engaño, lo mismo que «el amor», debía tomarse a broma. No se podía «profundizar». Por esto, el tono de sus preguntas fue, por lo menos, prematuro. Pero, al mismo tiempo, un error digno de ser cometido, en méritos del tono casi exageradamente burlón en el que la respuesta de Maggie se refugió:

—¿Compartimento estanco? ¿El mayor de todos ellos? ¡Bueno, es más que eso! ¡Es como todo un barco, es la mejor cabina, la cubierta principal, la sala de máquinas y la despensa! ¡Es más que un barco, es todos los barcos de la compañía! ¡Es la mesa del capitán, y todo mi equipaje, y todas las lecturas del viaje!

Maggie empleaba imágenes así, sacadas de buques y trenes, por estar familiarizada con «compañías marítimas», con el empleo de coches propios, por conocer continentes y mares, que el Príncipe, por el momento, todavía no estaba en condiciones de emular. Maggie empleaba imágenes de grandes máquinas y organizaciones modernas que el Príncipe todavía no conocía, pero que formaban parte integrante de la situación en la que ahora se hallaba; por eso pensaba serenamente que quizá su futuro quedara destrozado al tropezar con todo aquello.

A pesar de estar satisfecho con su compromiso matrimonial y de estimar que su futura esposa era una muchacha encantadora, la visión que el Príncipe tenía de aquella forma de vida de la muchacha era el principal objeto de su «enamoramiento», hasta el punto de que constituía un fuerte contraste con su interna disposición mental, contraste que él tenía la inteligencia suficiente de percibir con claridad. Su inteligencia le inducía a sentirse muy humilde, a desear no ser en manera alguna duro ni voraz, a no insistir en los derechos que le correspondían según los acuerdos adoptados; en resumen, a no comportarse con arrogancia ni con codicia. Y realmente, aunque fuera extraño, la sensación de este último peligro era, al mismo tiempo, un claro ejemplo de su actitud con respecto a los peligros procedentes de su fuero interno. Personalmente, estimaba el Príncipe, carecía de los vicios antes mencionados, de lo cual se alegraba. Pero, por otra parte, las gentes de la aristocracia habían tenido semejantes vicios en alto grado, y el Príncipe era todo él un aristócrata. La presencia de su alcurnia era como la percepción de un irresistible aroma que empapaba sus ropas, sus manos, su cabello y toda su persona, igual que si hubiera sido sumergido en un baño químico. El efecto no se advertía en parte concreta alguna, pero él se sentía constantemente a merced de las causas. Conocía muy bien la historia que precedió a su nacimiento, la conocía con todo detalle, y tenía el hábito de no perder de vista jamás las causas. ¿Y qué era ese franco reconocimiento de aquella fea historia, se preguntaba, sino parte del cultivo de la humildad? ¿Qué era aquel paso tan importante que acababa de dar, sino expresión del deseo de entrar en una nueva historia que, en la medida de lo posible, fuera contradicción e, incluso, en caso necesario, flagrante deshonra de la antigua? Si lo que ahora había conseguido no era suficiente, tendría que hacer algo distinto. Reconocía paladinamente —siempre en su humildad— que el instrumento que desde ahora debería utilizar tendría que ser el que le proporcionaran los millones del señor Verver. Para el Príncipe sólo esto existía en el mundo, ya que anteriormente había buscado otros medios, había mirado a su alrededor, y había visto la realidad. Pero, al mismo tiempo, el Príncipe, a pesar de ser humilde, no lo era tanto como para juzgarse frívolo o estúpido. Estimaba —lo cual quizá divierta a su biógrafo— que cuando uno era tan estúpido que se equivocaba en lo tocante a esta clase de problemas, sabía que se equivocaba. En consecuencia, él sabía que no se equivocaba y que su futuro

sería científico. Nada había en su persona que impidiera el carácter científico de su futuro. Se estaba aliando con la ciencia y, a fin de cuentas, ¿qué es la ciencia sino la carencia de prejuicios aliada con el dinero? Su vivir rebosaría de maquinaria, que es el antídoto de la superstición; superstición que es, a su vez, en gran medida, la consecuencia, o por lo menos la emanación, de los archivos. Consideraba que esas realidades —la de no ser totalmente inútil y la de su absoluta aceptación de los cambios de la época que se le avecinaba— restablecían el equilibrio de su ser, hasta ahora de tan diferente manera juzgado. Los momentos en que menos seguro se sentía de sí mismo eran aquellos en los que llegaba a pensar que, caso de ser realmente inútil, tal defecto le hubiera sido perdonado. Según tan absurdo parecer, creía que él, incluso con la tarta de la inutilidad, hubiera sido apetecible. Hasta tal punto llegaba la tolerancia del espíritu romántico de los Verver. Los pobrecillos ni siquiera sabían, a este respecto —el de la inutilidad— lo que la genuina palabra significaba. Él sí lo sabía, porque había visto la inutilidad, la había practicado y le había tomado las medidas. Se trataba de un recuerdo sobre el que debía bajar el telón de la misma manera que, mientras caminaba, bajaban las contraventanas de una tienda que cerraba temprano aquel perezoso día de verano, accionadas por una manivela. He aquí que de nuevo veía maquinaria a su alrededor, que era dinero, que era poder: el poder de los pueblos ricos. Pues bien, ahora él pertenecía a un pueblo rico, estaba de parte de los ricos, o quizá, lo que era aún más agradable, los ricos estaban de su parte.

Algo parecido a lo anterior era, por lo menos, el aire moral y el murmullo que le acompañaba al caminar. Esto hubiera sido ridículo —que tal moral brotara de tal fuente— si la gravedad de la opresión que he hecho constar al principio no guardara cierta armonía con la gravedad del momento. Otra circunstancia era la inminente llegada del grupo procedente de Italia. A primeras horas de la mañana acudiría a recibirles a Charing Cross: a su hermano menor, que se había casado antes que él pero cuya esposa, de raza semita y que aportó una dote suficiente para dorar la píldora, no se hallaba en condiciones de viajar; a su hermana con su marido, milaneses de lo más anglófilo que cabía encontrar; a su abuelo materno, el diplomático menos activo que se pueda imaginar; y su primo romano, Don Ottavio, el ex diputado y pariente más disponible entre todos los ex diputados y parientes. Se trataba de una escasa representación de consanguíneos que, a pesar de los deseos de Maggie de mantener en secreto la boda, le acompañarían al altar. Eran realmente pocos, pero formarían un grupo sin duda más numeroso que aquel otro que la novia pudiera convocar, porque, al carecer de riqueza, en lo referente a parentesco, a pocos podía elegir y, por otra parte, no quería recurrir a las invitaciones injustificadas. La actitud de la muchacha en esta materia había interesado al Príncipe, quien la había aceptado plenamente, y, al aceptarla, le había proporcionado una visión, claramente agradable, de la clase de criterios discriminatorios por los que su futura esposa se regiría, que eran de una naturaleza que armonizaba perfectamente con sus gustos. Le había dicho Maggie que tanto ella como su padre carecían de familia cercana y no estaban dispuestos a que su lugar fuera ocupado por parientes de mentirijillas, ni tampoco a salir por los caminos a buscar invitados. Sí, desde luego, conocían a mucha gente, pero el matrimonio era cosa íntima. A los amigos se les invitaba cuando se tenían familiares y parientes; sí, en este caso, se invitaba a todos. Pero no se les invitaba solos, para que cubrieran la falta de parientes y parecieran lo que en realidad no eran. Maggie sabía lo que quería y lo que le gustaba, y el Príncipe estaba plenamente dispuesto a aceptarlo, estimando que ambos hechos eran de buen augurio. El Príncipe esperaba y deseaba que Maggie fuera una mujer con carácter. Sí, su esposa debía tener carácter, y el Príncipe no temía que fuera excesivo. En otro tiempo tuvo que tratar con buen número de personas dotadas de carácter, principalmente con tres o cuatro eclesiásticos, entre los que descollaba su tío abuelo, el Cardenal, que había influido y participado en su educación, cosa que a él jamás le alteró ni inquietó. En consecuencia, esperaba con notable interés que este rasgo concurriera en quien iba a convertirse en la persona más íntimamente ligada a su vivir. Cuando advertía un rasgo de carácter en el comportamiento de Maggie, estimulaba su desarrollo.

Por lo tanto, en los momentos presentes, el Príncipe tenía la sensación de que todos sus papeles estaban en regla, de que el balance de sus cuentas cuadraba como jamás en su vida había cuadrado, por lo que podía darle un seco carpetazo. Sin duda alguna, la carpeta volvería a abrirse por sí misma con la llegada de los romanos, o quizá volviera a abrirse con ocasión de la cena de aquella misma noche, en Portland Place, en donde el señor Verver había sentado sus reales de tal botín tomado a Darío. Pero lo que definía la crisis del Príncipe era, tal como he dicho, la conciencia que tenía de las dos o tres horas inmediatas. Detenía sus pasos en las esquinas y en los cruces de las calles, y ante él y a oleadas se alzaba aquella conciencia, clara en cuanto a su origen aunque vaga en lo referente a su fin, de la que he hablado al principio, la conciencia que le impulsaba a hacer algo por sí mismo, cualquier cosa, antes de que fuera demasiado tarde. Cualquier

amigo a quien se hubiera confesado se habría reído francamente de este impulso y de que el Príncipe hubiera recurrido a él para tal confesión. Pero, a fin de cuentas, ¿por qué y por quién, sino por sí mismo y por las grandes ventajas anejas, iba él a casarse con una muchacha extraordinariamente encantadora, cuyas dotes, las de la clase sólida, estaban tan garantizadas como su dulzura? No iba el Príncipe a hacerlo todo por ella. Sin embargo, ocurrió que se había entregado con tanta libertad de pensar sin llegar a nada concreto, que poco tardó en alzarse ante él claramente definida la imagen de una persona amiga a la que el Príncipe a menudo había calificado de irónica. El Príncipe dejó de rendir el tributo de su atención a las caras que pasaban, para permitir que su impulso creciera y adquiriese fuerza. La juventud y la belleza apenas conseguían hacerle volver la cabeza, pero la imagen de la señora Assingham le obligó a detener un coche de alquiler. La juventud y la belleza de la señora Assingham pertenecían, más o menos, al pasado, pero el hecho de encontrarla en casa, como probablemente la encontraría, significaba «hacer» lo que él todavía tenía tiempo de hacer, daría una razón a su inquietud y, en consecuencia, le apaciguaría un tanto. Reconocer la conveniencia de aquella especial peregrinación —la señora Assingham vivía bastante lejos, en la alargada Cadogan Placere— presentaba, en realidad, suavizar un poco su inquietud. Percibir la oportunidad de darle las gracias, y de hacerlo en el momento en que lo iba a hacer, era el único problema que le preocupaba, como comprendía ahora, camino de la casa de la señora Assingham. Sí, exactamente ella, la señora Assingham, representaba, encarnaba, las ambiciones del Príncipe, y la agradable personalidad de esta señora era la fuerza que las había puesto en acción, sucesivamente, una tras otra. Ella era quien había hecho el matrimonio del Príncipe, de una manera tan real como su papal antepasado había hecho a la familia del Príncipe, a pesar de que éste no alcanzaba a comprender por qué la señora Assingham se había comportado así, a no ser que se tratara de una mujer perversamente romántica. Él no había sobornado a la señora Assingham ni la había convencido y nada le había dado hasta el momento, ni siquiera las gracias, por lo que los beneficios de esta señora —dicho sea vulgarmente— forzosamente debían de proceder, en su integridad, de los Verver.

Sin embargo, el Príncipe todavía pudo advertirse a sí mismo que estaba muy lejos de suponer que la señora Assingham hubiera sido groseramente remunerada. Tenía la certeza de que no era así, porque si el mundo se dividiera entre gente que acepta obsequios y gente que no los acepta, la señora Assingham quedaría englobada entre quienes forman la clase correcta y digna. Pero, por otra parte, su desinteresada conducta daba miedo, por cuanto significaba tremendos abismos de confianza. Admirable era el cariño que la señora Assingham sentía por Maggie, para quien poseer semejante amiga bien podía situarse entre las partidas de sus «activos». Pero la gran demostración del afecto de la señora Assingham había consistido en hacer lo preciso para que fraguara la relación entre el Príncipe y Maggie. Al tratar al Príncipe durante un invierno en Roma, encontrarle después en París y gustarle, como francamente le dijo desde un principio, la señora Assingham le había conferido la distinción de ser uno de sus jóvenes amigos y, de esta manera, le había rodeado de una inconfundible aureola, con la cual le había presentado. Sin embargo, el interés de la señora Assingham por Maggie —y ahí estaba la clave— poco habría significado sin el interés de la señora Assingham por el Príncipe. ¿Y cuál era el origen de este sentimiento que no había sido solicitado ni recompensado? ¿En qué había beneficiado el Príncipe —y ésta era la misma pregunta que se hacía con respecto al señor Verver— a la señora Assingham? Para el Príncipe recompensar a una mujer —lo mismo que formularle una petición— consistía, más o menos, en hacerle el amor. Ahora bien, a su entender, él jamás había hecho el amor, ni en el menor grado, a la señora Assingham, y creía que tampoco ésta lo hubiera creído ni por un instante. En la actualidad al Príncipe le gustaba distinguir a las mujeres a las que no había hecho el amor, por cuanto ello representaba —y esto era lo que le complacía— que se encontraba en una etapa de su vida diferente de aquella otra en la que le gustaba distinguir a las mujeres a quienes había hecho el amor. Y además de todo lo dicho, la señora Assingham jamás se había mostrado agresiva o resentida. ¿Se había dado el caso de que en alguna ocasión ella le hubiera reprochado algo? Esas cosas, los motivos que animaban a aquella clase de personas, eran oscuras, de una oscuridad un tanto alarmante, y formaban parte del elemento incomprensible que matizaba la buena suerte del Príncipe. Recordaba haber leído, siendo muchacho, un maravilloso cuento de Edgar Allan Poe, compatriota de su futura esposa, que demostraba, dicho sea incidentalmente, la gran imaginación que los norteamericanos pueden tener. Se trataba de la historia de un náufrago, Gordon Pym, que navegando a la deriva en una barquichuela hacia el Polo Norte —¿o era el Polo Sur?— llegó a acercarse a él más de lo que nadie había logrado y, en determinado momento, se encontró ante una masa de denso aire blanco que era como una deslumbrante cortina de luz que lo ocultaba todo, tal como lo oculta la oscuridad, aun cuando su color era el de la leche o

la nieve. Había momentos en que el Príncipe tenía la impresión de que su barquichuela se dirigía hacia tan misterioso fenómeno. El estado mental de sus nuevos amigos, incluyendo entre ellos a la señora Assingham, guardaba cierto parecido con la gran cortina blanca. Las únicas cortinas que el Príncipe había conocido eran rojas, negras o de colores intermedios, destinadas a producir, allí donde colgaban, oscuridades intencionadas y severas. Cuando estaban dispuestas para ocultar sorpresas, las sorpresas solían tener el carácter de sobresaltos.

Sin embargo, de las fuentes antes mencionadas, no eran sobresaltos lo que a su juicio cabía razonablemente esperar, sino que le pareció que podían proporcionarle algo, todavía no calificado, pero que, para darle una denominación aproximada, hubiera llamado «grado de confianza depositada en él». Durante el mes anterior estuvo paralizado y sumido en la meditación, súbitamente nacida o renacida, acerca de lo que él esperaba en términos generales. Lo curioso del caso radicaba en que no se trataba de esperar de él algo determinado, sino de una presunción amplia, blanda y blanca de estar él dotado de unos méritos casi incalificables, de una calidad y valor esenciales. Era como si fuera una vieja y rara moneda hecha con un oro de tal pureza que ya hubiera dejado de emplearse, con la impronta de unas artes medievales gloriosas y maravillosas, cuyo valor, al cambio moderno, en soberanos y en medias coronas, fuera realmente notable, pero, debido a que había medios más sutiles de utilizarla, tal valoración resultaba superflua. Ésta era la imagen más segura en la que aún le estaba permitido reposar. Iba a constituirse en una posesión, pero, al mismo tiempo, se resistía a quedar reducido a la suma de las diversas partes que lo componían. ¿Y qué significaba esto, sino que, si no le «daban el cambio», jamás sabrían —y tampoco él lo sabría— cuántas libras, chelines y peniques valía? De todas maneras, por el momento, estas preguntas carecían de respuesta. Lo único que el Príncipe tenía ante sí era la realidad de que le habían investido de tributos. Le tomaban en serio y perdida en la blanca niebla se encontraba la seriedad ajena con que era tomado. Esta seriedad se daba incluso en la señora Assingham, a pesar de estar dotada, como a menudo había demostrado, de espíritu burlón. Lo único que el Príncipe podía decir era que, por el momento, nada había hecho para romper el hechizo. ¿Qué ocurriría si esta misma tarde preguntara con sinceridad a la señora Assingham qué había, desde el punto de vista moral, detrás de su blanca cortina de velos? Equivaldría a preguntar qué esperaban de él. La señora Assingham probablemente contestaría: «¡Bueno, ya sabe, es lo que nosotros esperamos que usted sea!». Ante esta contestación al Príncipe no le quedaría más remedio que responder que ignoraba lo que debía ser. ¿Rompería el hechizo, al decir que no tenía la más leve idea al respecto? ¿Y, en realidad, qué idea podía tener? Por otra parte, también se tomaba en serio a sí mismo; sí, era para él una cuestión de puntillo, aunque no, simplemente una cuestión de fantasía o pretensión. De vez en cuando, el Príncipe veía modos y maneras de dar el debido tratamiento a la estimación que de sí mismo tenía. Pero la estimación ajena, dijeran lo que dijesen, tendría que ser sometida a una prueba práctica en un momento u otro. Y como quiera que la prueba práctica tendría que ser forzosamente proporcionada al conjunto de sus atributos, se llegaba de inmediato a una escala que, honradamente, él no podía siquiera vislumbrar. ¿Quién, salvo el poseedor de miles de millones, podía determinar el valor de mil millones? Esta medida era el objeto oculto por los velos, pero el Príncipe, cuando el coche de alquiler en que viajaba se detuvo en Cadogan Place, se sintió más cerca del velo. Y se prometió a sí mismo darle por lo menos un tirón.

Capítulo II

—Realmente, no son buenos los días presentes.

Éstas fueron las palabras que el Príncipe dijo a Fanny Assingham después de manifestarle la alegría que le producía encontrarla en casa; luego, ya con la taza de té en la mano, le comunicó las últimas noticias, es decir, la firma de los documentos, hacía una hora, *de part et d'autre*, y el telegrama que le habían enviado sus padrinos, llegados a París en la mañana del día anterior, que ahora descansaban un poco creyendo, los pobrecillos, que estaban viviendo una tremenda aventura.

—Somos gente muy sencilla, comparados con usted, algo así como los primos de provincias.

El Príncipe también observó:

—Para mi hermana y su marido, París es el fin del mundo, por lo que Londres representa más o menos otro planeta. Para ellos, lo mismo que para muchos de nosotros, Londres ha sido siempre La Meca y ésta es realmente su primera peregrinación. La «vieja Inglaterra» ha sido, en su concepto, una gran tienda en la que comprar artículos de caucho y cuero, de los que se han abastecido siempre en la mayor medida posible. Lo cual significa que los verá, a todos, envueltos en constantes sonrisas. Debemos tratarlos sin la menor ceremonia. Maggie es maravillosa y ha hecho los preparativos a una escala tremenda. Insiste en tener invitados en su casa a los *sposi* y a mi tío. Los otros serán mis invitados. Ya he reservado sus habitaciones en el hotel, y, luego de las solemnes firmas de hace una hora, bien podemos decir que el expediente ha quedado cerrado en lo que a mí respecta.

Divertida, la señora Assingham le preguntó:

—¿Significa esto que está atemorizado?

—Terriblemente. Lo único que puedo hacer ya es contemplar cómo el monstruo se acerca más y más. Son malos días éstos. No son ni una cosa ni otra. En realidad no tengo nada todavía, pero a pesar de eso puedo perderlo todo. Aún no sabemos lo que puede ocurrir.

El modo en que la señora Assingham se rió de él durante un instante casi le irritó. Al Príncipe se le antojó que aquella risa surgía de detrás de la cortina blanca. Era un síntoma de la profunda serenidad de la señora Assingham, una serenidad que más que tranquilizar preocupaba al Príncipe. Y, a fin de cuentas, había acudido allí para que le tranquilizaran, para que le serenaran en su mística impaciencia, para que le dijeran lo que podía comprender y creer. Aquél había sido el objeto de su visita. La señora Assingham le dijo:

—¿De manera que llama usted monstruo al matrimonio? Reconozco que, en el mejor de los casos, el matrimonio da miedo. Pero, por lo que más quiera, si esto es lo que piensa de él, haga cuanto pueda para no huir.

El Príncipe replicó:

—¡No! Huir del matrimonio representaría huir de usted, y ya le he dicho con harta frecuencia lo mucho que confío en usted para que me saque adelante.

Tanto le gustó al Príncipe la manera en que la señora Assingham acogió estas palabras, allí, en el rincón del sofá, que decidió dar a su sinceridad —porque de sinceridad se trataba— la máxima expresión.

—Voy a emprender un largo viaje a través de un mar desconocido; mi barco está aparejado y dispuesto, la carga en su debido lugar, la tripulación completa. Pero parece que estoy incapacitado para viajar solo, mi

nave necesita ir emparejada, necesita tener, en la soledad del mar, un… ¿cómo decirlo?, un consorte. No le pido que viaje a bordo conmigo pero necesito ver otra vela para orientarme. Puedo asegurarle que no sé manejar la brújula, pero si me guían, puedo seguir perfectamente a mi guía. Y usted debe serlo para mí.

—¿Y cómo sabrá cuál es el lugar al que le llevo?

—Pues por el medio de tener en cuenta que usted me ha conducido con seguridad al punto en que ahora me encuentro. En realidad jamás hubiera llegado a donde estoy sin usted. Usted me proporcionó la nave y, si bien no ha subido a bordo conmigo, me ha acompañado, siempre con suma bondad, hasta el muelle. Su propia nave está amarrada junta a la mía y, ahora, no puede usted abandonarme.

De nuevo la señora Assingham se mostró divertida, de una manera que al Príncipe incluso le pareció excesiva ya que, con la consiguiente sorpresa, tuvo la impresión de haberle comunicado su nerviosismo. La señora Assingham le estaba tratando como si, en vez de decir verdades, le ofreciera bellas imágenes para su diversión. Sonriente, la señora Assingham dijo:

—¿Mi nave, querido Príncipe? ¿Acaso tengo yo una nave en este mundo? Esta casita es nuestra nave, la de Bob y la mía, y aún damos gracias por tenerla. Hemos viajado mucho, y muy lejos, viviendo, como suele decirse, totalmente al día y sin dar descanso a los pies. Ahora, ha llegado el momento de recalar.

Ante estas palabras, el joven Príncipe protestó, indignado:

—¡Habla usted de descansar! ¡Esto es puro egoísmo! ¿Descansar precisamente cuando me lanza usted a una aventura?

La señora Assingham movió negativamente la cabeza, con expresión de amable lucidez:

—¡Por Dios, no diga usted que se trata de una aventura! Usted ha tenido sus aventuras, de la misma manera que yo he tenido las mías. En ningún momento he pensado que alguno de los dos deba volver a comenzar aventuras. La última de las mías consistió, precisamente, en hacer por usted lo que tan amablemente ha mencionado. Pero todo ha consistido sencillamente en conducirle a puerto seguro. Usted ha hablado de nave, y creo que la comparación no es correcta. Sus zozobras han terminado. Prácticamente se encuentra ya en puerto seguro.

La señora Assingham concluyó:

—En el puerto de las Islas Doradas.

El Príncipe miró a su alrededor para centrarse mayormente en el lugar en que se hallaba. Y, luego, cuando habló dubitativamente, causó la impresión de decir unas palabras que eran sustitución de otras.

—¡Sé perfectamente dónde estoy! Me niego a que me dejen solo, pero el motivo de mi visita ha sido, desde luego, darle las gracias. Si bien es cierto que el día de hoy me ha parecido representar, por primera vez, la terminación de los preliminares, tampoco cabe negar que tales preliminares no hubieran existido sin el concurso de su ayuda. Los primeros corrieron exclusivamente de su cuenta.

—La verdad es que fueron facilísimos.

Sonriente, la señora Assingham añadió:

—Los he visto mucho más difíciles. Debe usted saber que todo se desarrolló por sí solo. En consecuencia, debe usted pensar que todo seguirá desarrollándose de la misma manera.

El Príncipe se apresuró a mostrarse de acuerdo:

—¡Todo se desarrolló de maravilla! Pero fue a usted a quien se le ocurrió. —¡Ya usted también, Príncipe!

Por unos instantes, el Príncipe la miró con cierta dureza, y dijo:

—Usted tuvo la idea antes que yo. En su mayor parte fue más suya que mía.

La señora Assingham le devolvió la mirada, y habló como si sus palabras la hubieran inducido a dudar:

—Ciertamente la idea me gustaba, y en ese sentido interpreto sus palabras, pero tengo la seguridad de que también le gustaba a usted. Insisto en que, en su caso, mi trabajo fue muy fácil. Lo único que tuve que hacer fue hablar en su nombre cuando llegó el momento oportuno.

—Lo que dice es verdad. Pero de todas maneras me está usted abandonando, me deja, se lava las manos de cuanto a mí concierne. Pero no le será fácil, no estoy dispuesto a permitírselo.

El Príncipe volvió a pasar la vista por aquella linda estancia que la señora Assingham acababa de calificar de último refugio, de lugar de paz para un matrimonio fatigado de recorrer el mundo, al que últimamente ella se había retirado en compañía de Bob.

El Príncipe dijo:

—No perderé de vista este lugar. Diga lo que diga, voy a necesitarla. Sabe muy bien que por nadie renunciaría a usted.

Después de un momento de silencio, la señora Assingham añadió:

—Si usted tiene miedo, que no lo tiene, desde luego, ¿por qué ha de intentar que también lo tenga yo?

El Príncipe esperó unos instantes antes de contestar a la pregunta:

—Usted ha dicho que le «gustaba» el empeño de hacer posible mi compromiso matrimonial. Considero que es hermoso que le gustara, me parece encantador e inolvidable. Pero, además, es misterioso. ¿Por qué, mi querida y deliciosa mujer, le gustaba?

—Realmente no sé exactamente cómo interpretar semejante pregunta. Si a estas alturas no ha sido usted capaz de averiguarlo por sí mismo, ¿qué significado podrá tener para usted cualquier cosa que le diga al respecto?

Como quiera que el Príncipe guardó silencio, la señora Assingham añadió:

—¿Es que a fin de cuentas no se percata, no es consciente, en todo instante, de la perfección de esa criatura de quien le he dado posesión?

—Sí, en todo momento soy consciente y le estoy agradecido. Y ésta es precisamente la base de mi pregunta. No se trató solamente de la cuestión de entregarme usted a mí, sino también de entregarla a ella. Se trataba más de su destino que del mío. Usted tenía de ella el más alto concepto que una mujer pueda tener de otra, y, a pesar de esto, según sus propias palabras, usted gozó al contribuir a que corriera un riesgo.

La señora Assingham había mantenido la vista fija en el Príncipe mientras éste hablaba y esto fue, evidentemente, lo que motivó que repitiera las palabras antes dichas:

—¿Intenta atemorizarme?

—Lo que dice me parece absurdo. No soy vulgar. Al parecer, es usted incapaz de comprender mi buena fe y mi humildad.

Tras una pausa, el joven Príncipe insistió:

—Soy terriblemente humilde. Ésta es la sensación que tengo hoy, cuando todo está tan terminado y dispuesto. Y usted no parece dispuesta a tomarme en serio.

La señora Assingham siguió mirándole a la cara como si realmente el Príncipe le preocupara un poco:

—¡Oh, ustedes, los profundos y antiguos italianos!

El Príncipe exclamó:

—¡Ahora! ¡A esto quería que llegara! ¡Por fin ha hablado usted con sentido de la responsabilidad!

—Sí, por cuanto que, si usted es «humilde», forzosamente ha de ser peligroso.

La señora Assingham hizo una pausa, durante la cual el Príncipe se limitó a sonreír. Luego, la señora Assingham dijo:

—No deseo en modo alguno perderle de vista. Y, en caso de que así fuera, lo consideraría injusto.

—Muchas gracias, eso es lo que quería que me dijera. A fin de cuentas, tengo la seguridad de que cuanto más esté usted a mi lado mayor será mi comprensión. Esto es lo único que deseo en el mundo. En realidad, pienso que soy una persona excelente en todo, con la excepción de ser estúpido. Sé hacer bastante bien todas las cosas que veo. Pero, antes de hacer algo, he de verlo.

Después de una pausa el Príncipe prosiguió su argumentación:

—En absoluto me molesta que me enseñen las cosas, en realidad incluso me gusta. En consecuencia, esto es lo que quiero y lo que siempre querré: sus ojos. Deseo mirar a través de ellos, incluso a riesgo de que me muestren algo que quizá no me agrade.

El Príncipe concluyó:

—Porque de esta manera sabré. Y de esto jamás tendré miedo.

Quizá la señora Assingham hubiera esperado el momento de saber adónde irían a parar las palabras del Príncipe, pero lo cierto es que habló con una nota de impaciencia:

—¿Se puede saber de qué está hablando?

Con perfecta tranquilidad, el Príncipe pudo responder:

—De mi real y honrado temor a estar, algún día, equivocado sin saberlo. Siempre confiaré en usted, en este aspecto, siempre confiaré en que me lo dirá. Sí, en el caso de ustedes, percatarse del error constituye un instinto. Nosotros carecemos de él, por lo menos en la medida en que ustedes lo tienen. En consecuencia…

Pero el Príncipe ya había dicho todo lo que tenía que decir, por lo que guardó silencio, sonrió, y exclamó:

—*Ecco*!

No cabía negar que el Príncipe había conseguido impresionar a la señora Assingham, pero también es

preciso tener en cuenta que el Príncipe siempre había gustado a la señora Assingham, quien ahora observó:

—Me gustaría mucho que me indicara un instinto que usted no posea.

Pues bien, el Príncipe inmediatamente sacó a relucir uno:

—El instinto moral, mi querida señora Assingham. Y me refiero a este instinto en la acepción que para ustedes tiene. Desde luego estoy dotado de cierto sentido que, en nuestra vieja, querida y retrasada Roma, pasa por sentido moral. Pero se parece tanto al de ustedes como la tortuosa escalera de peldaños de piedra de un castillo en ruinas de nuestro Quattrocento se pueda parecer al «vertiginoso ascensor» de uno de los edificios de quince plantas del señor Verver. El sentido moral de ustedes funciona a vapor y le eleva a uno igual que un cohete. Nuestro sentido moral es lento, empinado, oscuro, y son muchos los peldaños que en él faltan. En resumen, muchas veces es tan corto que ya cuando comienza a elevarse gira sobre sí mismo y desciende también.

—¿Confía ascender de otra manera?

—Sí, o no verme obligado a ascender en manera alguna.

Pronunciadas estas palabras, añadió:

—De todas maneras, creo habérselo dicho ya al principio.

La señora Assingham se limitó a exclamar:

—¡Maquiavelo!

—Me honra mucho, señora, calificándome así. Realmente me gustaría mucho tener la inteligencia de Maquiavelo. Sin embargo, si usted creyera de verdad que soy tan perverso como él, no me lo diría.

Alegremente, concluyó:

—Pero da igual, a fin de cuentas, siempre podré recurrir a usted.

Después se quedaron los dos mirándose a los ojos durante unos instantes. Y luego, sin comentario alguno, la señora Assingham preguntó al Príncipe si quería más té. El Príncipe advirtió rápidamente que, al parecer, la señora Assingham sólo estaba dispuesta a darle té y desarrolló una teoría que la hizo reír: el té de la raza inglesa era, en cierta manera, su moralidad, «hecha» con agua hirviendo, en un potecillo, de modo y manera que cuanto más té bebiera uno más moral sería. Esta chanza sirvió de transición, y la señora Assingham formuló al Príncipe algunas preguntas acerca de su hermana y demás familiares, interesándose por lo que Bob, su marido, podría hacer en atención a los caballeros recién llegados, a quienes visitaría tan pronto el Príncipe partiera. En el curso de esta conversación, el Príncipe estuvo gracioso describiendo a sus parientes, contando algunas anécdotas y refiriendo sus costumbres; imitó sus modales y profetizó su comportamiento como de lo más rebuscado de cuanto había pasado por Cadogan Place. La señora Assingham manifestó que esto, precisamente esto, sería la causa de que les tomara cariño, palabras que dieron lugar a que su visitante manifestara de nuevo cuán grande era su consuelo al poder confiar en ella. El Príncipe llevaba ya unos veinte minutos en compañía de la señora Assingham, pero le había hecho otras visitas más largas y ahora se demoraba como si con ello quisiera mostrarle su agradecimiento. Se demoró a pesar —y esto era lo que le preocupaba por el momento— de la nerviosa inquietud que le había llevado allí, inquietud que fue alimentada por el escepticismo con que ella había intentado apaciguarla. La señora Assingham no había tranquilizado al Príncipe, y llegó un momento en que vio claramente la causa de su fracaso en dicho empeño. El Príncipe se dio cuenta de que él no la había atemorizado, tal como ésta había dicho, pero, a pesar de todo, no se sentía tranquila. Se había puesto nerviosa pero había procurado disimularlo. La visión del Príncipe, después de que hubieran anunciado su nombre, la había dejado desconcertada. El joven estaba convencido y esta convicción adquirió mayor profundidad y un perfil más concreto, pero produjo asimismo el efecto de agradarle a él mismo. Parecía que, con su visita, hubiera conseguido más aún de lo que se había propuesto. Y debía ser algo importante —exactamente de esto se trataba— lo que en este momento afectaba a la señora Assingham, quien, en el curso de su amistad con el Príncipe, ahora ya tan considerable, jamás se había mostrado afectada por nada. Esperar y contemplarla afectada significaba para él que se encontraba ante un problema y, aunque fuera extraño, habida cuenta de la escasa base que para ello tenía, el corazón comenzó a latirle con una sensación de intriga expectante. Por fin, como si de un final feliz se tratara, los dos dejaron de fingir, es decir, de fingir que se engañaban en apariencia el uno al otro. Lo no dicho había aflorado y se produjo un momento —ninguno de los dos hubiera podido decir cuánto tiempo duró— en que quedaron reducidos a mirarse el uno al otro de una forma fuera de lo común, como único medio de comunicación. En esos instantes, su portentoso silencio causaba la impresión de tratarse de una apuesta, o de que les estuvieran haciendo una fotografía, e incluso de que hubiesen decidido formar un *tableau vivant*.

El espectador del que, con su actitud, eran merecedores hubiera sacado sus propias conclusiones dada la intensidad de la comunión de aquellos dos seres, o, sin sacar conclusiones, hubiera hecho un relato de la escena desde un punto de vista estético, en un complaciente juego de nuestro moderno sentido del tipo humano, que tan poco se diferencia de nuestra moderno sentido de la belleza. El sentido del tipo estaba allí expresado en su peor acepción, en la oscura y nítida cabeza de la señora Assingham, en la que el cabello negro y seco formaba ondas menudas y numerosas que le daban un aspecto tan a la moda que era más a la moda de lo que ella misma deseaba. Rebosante de objeciones a todo lo que fuera excesivamente evidente, la señora Assingham aún no había aceptado su flagrante apariencia y tampoco había sabido sacar el mejor partido de sus atributos externos, causa de equívocas interpretaciones. Su intensa morenez, su generosa nariz, sus cejas resaltadas cual las de una actriz y la amplitud de su persona, en la que la media edad ya había dejado su impronta, parecían presentarla insistentemente como una hija del sur o, quizá mejor, del este, criada en hamacas y divanes, alimentada con sorbetes y servida por esclavas. Causaba la impresión de que la más enérgica actividad de que era capaz fuese coger una mandolina, sin levantarse o compartir una fruta confitada con una gacela domesticada. Sin embargo, la señora Assingham no era una mimada judía ni una indolente criolla, sino que según constaba había nacido en Nueva York y se había educado en la «disciplina de Europa». Solía vestir ropas de tonos amarillos y púrpura porque consideraba mejor, como ella decía cuando se terciaba la ocasión, parecer una especie de reina de Saba que una *revendeuse*. Por esta misma razón se ponía perlas en el cabello y se adornaba con oro y carmesí los vestidos de tarde. Sostenía la teoría de que la naturaleza la había vestido con harta exageración y que sólo tenía a su disposición el recurso de ahogar aquella exageración, ya que le era imposible moderarla. Por esto iba cubierta de objetos y vivía rodeada de ellos, objetos que no eran más que evidentes chucherías y juguetes, que formaban parte de diversiones con las que le agradaba obsequiar a sus amigos. Estos amigos estaban al tanto del juego, consistente en contrastar la disparidad que se daba entre el carácter y el aspecto de la señora Assingham. Su carácter quedaba de manifiesto por un segundo gesto de su rostro, gesto que revelaba al espectador que la visión que la señora Assingham tenía de los talantes del mundo en modo alguno era supina o pasiva. Gozaba y necesitaba el cálido ambiente de la amistad; pero, sin que pudiera determinarse exactamente la razón, sus ojos norteamericanos buscaban las oportunidades de amistad mirando bajo sus párpados de Jerusalén. En resumen, con su falsa indolencia, su falso ocio, sus falsas perlas, palmeras, patios y fuentes, la señora Assingham era una persona para quien la vida estaba llena de infinitos detalles, que la dejaban en el mismo instante en que ella, siempre serena y equilibrada, los descubría.

«A pesar de que parezca compleja», como decía a menudo la señora Assingham, había encontrado en la comprensión su mejor recurso. La comprensión la tenía muy ocupada y la obligaba a mantenerse erguida. Tenía en la vida dos grandes huecos que llenar y decía que se dedicaba a llenarlos con retazos de vida social, de la misma manera que las viejas señoras norteamericanas de tiempos pasados llenaban el cesto de la labor con retales de seda, con vistas a tener los suficientes para confeccionar.

Uno de los huecos en la vida de la señora Assingham era la falta de hijos y el otro, la carencia de fortuna. Y resultaba maravilloso advertir cómo, al llegar con el paso del tiempo a la madurez, estas dos deficiencias dejaron de manifestarse. La comprensión y la curiosidad podían dar carácter filial a los objetos en que se centraba, del mismo modo que un marido inglés que, en sus tiempos militares se había encargado de «todo» en su regimiento, podía hacer florecer la economía cual si de una cosa se tratara. Pocos años después de haber contraído matrimonio, el coronel Bob se había retirado del ejército en el que había hecho, laudablemente en cuanto al enriquecimiento, lo que se podía esperar de su personal experiencia. Ahora dedicaba todo su tiempo a la labor de jardinería antes referida. Entre los amigos más jóvenes de esta pareja corría la leyenda, casi tan venerable que no permitía la crítica histórica, de que aquel matrimonio, el más feliz entre los de su clase, se había celebrado en el lejano alborear de una época, en un primitivo período en el que ciertos prejuicios —como el que las muchachas norteamericanas fuesen consideradas «aceptables»— aún no se tenían en cuenta, por lo que aquella agradable pareja había sido, teniendo en consideración los riesgos corridos, audaz y original a la par, y, en el atardecer de su vida, honrosamente considerada como la descubridora de una especie de ruta nupcial Norte-Oeste. Sin embargo, la señora Assingham tenía su particular y más fundada opinión al respecto, y creía que desde los tiempos de Pocahontas hasta nuestros días no se había producido el histórico momento en que un joven inglés no se hubiera sentido animado de una pasión repentina y en que una muchacha norteamericana no se hubiera entregado plenamente sin dudar un instante; pero a pesar de esto la señora Assingham aceptaba con resignación los laureles de la fundadora, puesto que, a fin de cuentas, se la podía considerar la *doyenne* de su trasplantada tribu, sobre

todo porque se había ingeniado muchas combinaciones aun cuando no la que Bob se ingenió. Él fue quien se la inventó, quien en un raro chispazo de ingenio la sacó de la nada y, con el paso de los años, la utilizó como prueba fehaciente de su elevada inteligencia. Si la señora Assingham procuraba mantener su aguzado ingenio lo hacía sobre todo para que redundara en reconocimiento de los méritos de su marido. Sin embargo, a decir verdad y en privado, había momentos en que se daba cuenta de lo poco que su marido —a pesar de sus altos méritos— hubiera podido conseguir de no haber sido por ella. En realidad, su inteligencia fue puesta a prueba cuando su visitante por fin le dijo:

—Francamente, tengo la impresión de que no me trata con justicia. Está usted preocupada por algo que no me dice.

La sonrisa de la señora Assingham fue un tanto apagada al contestar:

—¿Estoy obligada a decirle todo lo que me preocupa?

—No se trata de decirlo todo, sino de decir todo lo que de una u otra forma pueda afectarme. Esto no debe usted reservárselo. Sabe con cuánto cuidado deseo proceder, considerando todos los detalles, para no cometer un error que pueda perjudicarla a ella.

Al oír estas palabras, reaccionó preguntando, extrañada:

—¿A ella?

—A ella y a él. A nuestros dos amigos. A Maggie y a su padre.

La señora Assingham confesó:

—Realmente hay algo que me preocupa. Sí, ha ocurrido algo para lo que no estaba preparada. Pero se trata de un hecho que, en puridad, no le concierne.

El Príncipe, en inmediata reacción de alegría, echó la cabeza atrás y dijo:

—¿Qué quiere usted decir con la palabra «puridad»? Me parece importantísima. Ha empleado usted una de esas fórmulas que suelen utilizarse para decir algo… no sé… equívoco. Yo no hablo así. ¿Qué ha ocurrido? ¿Qué es ese algo que realmente me afecta?

La dueña de la casa eliminó de su voz el tono irónico e ingenioso:

—Será para mí un placer que asuma usted la parte que le corresponde.

Charlotte Stant está en Londres. Hace unos instantes se encontraba en esta casa.

—¿La señorita Stant? ¿De veras?

El Príncipe se había mostrado claramente sorprendido, su reacción fue sincera y sus ojos quedaron fijos en los de la señora Assingham, con cierta dureza en sus miradas. Entonces preguntó inmediatamente:

—¿Ha llegado de Norteamérica?

—Parece que ha llegado este mediodía, desde Southampton, y se ha alojado en un hotel. Me ha visitado después del almuerzo y ha estado conmigo más de una hora.

El joven Príncipe la escuchó con atención aunque su interés era inferior a su alegría:

—¿Y cree que este hecho me afecta en parte? ¿Cuál es esa parte?

—La que usted quiera. Esa parte que, hace unos momentos, se mostraba tan deseoso de asumir. Usted ha insistido en conocer el hecho en cuestión.

El Príncipe la miró con consciente desconcierto y ella pudo advertir que la cara del joven había cambiado de color; pero, a pesar de todo, no perdió la compostura:

—Cuando ha insistido, ignoraba de qué hecho se trataba. —¿No creía que pudiera ser tan grave?

—¿Lo considera grave?

Sonriendo, la señora Assingham repuso:

—Solamente lo estimo así por lo que parece haberle afectado.

El Príncipe dudó, aún con rastros del reavivado color en la cara, esforzándose por conservar el aplomo:

—Pero usted ha reconocido que estaba preocupada.

—Debido únicamente a que yo no le he pedido a la señora Stant que viniera, de la misma manera que, según creo, tampoco se lo ha pedido Maggie.

El Príncipe meditó. Luego, como si se alegrase de poder decir algo totalmente natural y cierto, dijo:

—Es verdad. Maggie no le ha pedido que venga.

Después de unos instantes de silencio, el joven añadió:

—Pero tengo la seguridad de que Maggie se alegrará de ver a la señorita Stant.

Con un matiz diferente en el tono grave de su voz, la señora Assingham observó:

—Sí, estoy segura de ello.

—Será una gran alegría para Maggie. ¿La señorita Stant ha ido ahora a verla?

—Ha vuelto al hotel para traer sus cosas aquí. No puedo permitir que viva sola en un hotel.

—No. Lo comprendo.

—Si está en Londres, debe vivir aquí.

El Príncipe comprendió al instante lo que estas palabras comportaban:

—¿La está esperando ahora?

—Estará aquí de un momento a otro. Si espera un poco, la verá.

—¡Me parece maravilloso! —exclamó el Príncipe.

Pero estas últimas palabras sonaron un poco como si sustituyeran a otras, y la sustitución hubiera sido muy rápida. Tuvieron cierto tono accidental, pero parecía que el Príncipe hubiera querido que tuvieran tono de firmeza. En consecuencia, firmeza fue lo que él demostró en sus siguientes palabras:

—Si no fuera por el ajetreo propio de estos días, Maggie la habría invitado a su casa.

Lúcido, el Príncipe prosiguió:

—A fin de cuentas, el acontecimiento que se avecina es una buena razón para que Maggie desee la compañía de la señorita Stant.

Por todo comentario, la señora Assingham le miró y, en un momento, esta mirada produjo más efecto que cuanto hubiese podido decirle, ya que el Príncipe formuló una pregunta casi sin sentido:

—¿Y para qué ha venido?

La señora Assingham se echó a reír:

—Por eso, por lo que usted ha dicho. Ha venido por su matrimonio. Intrigado, preguntó:

—¿Mi matrimonio?

—El de Maggie… A fin de cuentas es el mismo. Ha venido por el gran acontecimiento. Y también porque se siente muy sola.

—¿Es ésta la razón que le ha dado?

—No lo recuerdo con exactitud, me ha dado tantas… La pobrecilla tiene toda clase de razones. Pero hay una que, sea lo que sea lo que haga, siempre recordaré aunque no me la digan.

El Príncipe, creyendo que debía conocer esta razón y como no alcanzaba a comprenderla, preguntó:

—¿Y de qué razón se trata?

—Que no tiene hogar. Carece de él, por completo. Está extremadamente sola.

Una vez más se mostró comprensivo:

—Y tiene pocos medios.

—Poquísimos. Y con los gastos que supone viajar y alojarse en un hotel, no es precisamente una razón para que vaya de un lado a otro.

—Desde luego. Pero también es cierto que su país no le gusta.

—¿Su país, querido Príncipe? ¿Suyo, dice?

La atribución pareció divertir a la señora Assingham, quien prosiguió:

—Es muy poco suyo. Ahora lo ha rechazado, pero nunca ha tenido mucho más que ver con él.

Cortésmente, el Príncipe explicó:

—He dicho suyo de la misma forma en que, a estas alturas, podría decir mío. Le aseguro que tengo la sensación de que, más o menos, aquellas inmensas tierras me pertenecen.

—Esto se debe a su buena fortuna y a su punto de vista. Es propietario —o pronto lo será— de buena parte de ellas. Charlotte, según me ha dicho, no tiene casi nada en el mundo, salvo dos colosales baúles de los que sólo le he permitido traer uno a esta casa.

Después de una pausa, la señora Assingham añadió:

—Ante la presencia de Charlotte, sus propiedades, Príncipe, quedarán un tanto depreciadas.

El Príncipe pensó en estas cosas, pensó en todo. Pero siempre tenía al alcance de la mano el recurso de quitar importancia a todo:

—¿Con qué intenciones ha venido respecto a mí?

Y al momento, como si estas palabras hubieran sido excesivamente graves, el Príncipe dio la nota que menos relación guardaba con él:

—*Est-elle toujours aussi belle*?

Éste era el punto más lejano al que Charlotte Stant podía ser relegada.

La señora Assingham habló en tono ligero:

—Como siempre. A mi parecer, Charlotte es la persona cuyo aspecto físico más opiniones contradictorias suscita en el mundo. Todo depende de la apreciación personal de cada uno. Hay quienes la admiran y hay

quienes no. Y los que no la admiran la critican.

—¡No, esto no es justo!

—¿Criticarla? ¡Bueno, usted mismo ha contestado su pregunta! El Príncipe aceptó con buen humor la lección:

—¡Efectivamente!

Y, acto seguido, volvió a sumirse en su anterior reserva, aunque se le notaba agradecido y dócil:

—Sólo quería decir que la señorita Stant merece algo más, y mejor, que críticas. Cuando se comienza a criticar a alguien…

El tono del Príncipe había sido vago y amable. La señora Assingham observó:

—Estoy plenamente de acuerdo en que, mientras se pueda, más vale evitar la crítica. Pero cuando es preciso…

Dejó inacabada la frase, lo que motivó que él preguntara:

—¿Sí?

—Ya sabe lo que quiero decir.

Sonriente, el Príncipe repuso:

—Comprendo. Sin embargo, ahora resulta que quizá yo no comprenda el significado de mis propias palabras.

—Pues desde todos los puntos de vista esto es lo que ahora, y sobre todo, debiera usted comprender.

Sin embargo, la señora Assingham no prosiguió esta argumentación debido, al parecer, a ciertos escrúpulos que sentía en seguir usando el tono de que se había servido. Dijo:

—Desde luego, comprendo perfectamente que, habida cuenta de la amistad de Charlotte con Maggie, Charlotte haya querido estar presente. Charlotte ha actuado impulsivamente pero con generosidad.

—¡Se ha comportado muy bien!

—He dicho «con generosidad» debido a que no se ha preocupado de los gastos en absoluto. Ahora habrá de pagar las consecuencias. Pero carece de importancia.

El Príncipe comprendió cuán poca importancia tenía dicha circunstancia:

—Usted cuidará de ella.

—Yo cuidaré de ella.

—No habrá problemas.

—No habrá problemas.

—En ese caso, ¿por qué está preocupada?

La pregunta la sorprendió aunque sólo por un instante:

—No lo estoy. No, no lo estoy más que usted.

Los ojos color azul oscuro del Príncipe eran muy hermosos y, en ocasiones, parecían exactamente ni más ni menos que las altas ventanas de un palacio romano, o las de una histórica fachada debida a uno de los grandes arquitectos de los viejos tiempos, abiertas de par en par al aire dorado en día de gran fiesta. En estas ocasiones, su aspecto sugería una imagen de un muy noble personaje que, esperado y aclamado en la calle por la muchedumbre, y con dorados puños de encaje cayendo sobre la balaustrada en que apoya las manos, accede valerosa y alegremente a mostrar su persona, no tanto en su propio interés cuanto en el de sus espectadores y súbditos, cuya necesidad de admirar, de pasmarse incluso, es preciso considerar periódicamente. En este sentido, su expresión adquirió la misma viveza y concreción que la expresión de una hermosa presencia personal, la de un príncipe de veras, la de un gobernante, guerrero o protector, dada su deslumbrante arquitectura y el sentido de su función. En frase feliz se había dicho que la cara del Príncipe aparecida en aquel gran marco era la de uno de sus más nobles antepasados. Fuera cual fuese ahora el antepasado en cuestión, el Príncipe se encontraba, en beneficio de la señora Assingham, a la vista del pueblo. Parecía, inclinado sobre damascos carmesíes, saludar a la esplendente luz del día. Parecía más joven de lo que era. Era hermoso, inocente y vago. El Príncipe exclamó, tonante y claro:

—¡Yo no lo estoy!

La señora Assingham observó:

—¡Sólo faltaría que lo estuviera, señor! ¡No tendría la más leve excusa!

El Príncipe se mostró de acuerdo en que mucho tendría que buscar para encontrarla, con lo que la serenidad de ambos adquirió tal importancia que parecía que un riesgo, procedente de la parte contraria, los hubiera amenazado directamente. El único problema radicaba en que, después de haber dado tan claras pruebas de su tranquilidad y alegre ánimo, la señora Assingham tenía que explicar un poco su anterior

talante y lo hizo antes de pasar a otro tema:

—Mi primer impulso es siempre el de comportarme como si temiera complicaciones. Pero, en realidad, no las temo, sino que me gustan. Con ellas me encuentro en mi elemento.

El joven aceptó esta explicación, aunque observó:

—De todas maneras, no nos encontramos ante ninguna complicación. Dubitativa, respondió la señora:

—Una muchacha bella, inteligente y de extraño carácter, alojada en casa, es siempre una complicación.

El joven Príncipe ponderó estas palabras casi como si se tratara de un problema nuevo en el mundo, y dijo:

—¿Se quedará mucho tiempo?

Su amiga soltó una carcajada:

—¿Cómo voy a saberlo? No se lo he preguntado.

—Claro… No puede.

Cierto tono en sus palabras volvió a divertir a la señora Assingham:

—¿Cree que usted puede?

Un tanto perplejo, él respondió:

—¿Yo?

—¿Cree usted que puede sonsacarle, para decírmelo, la probable duración de su estancia?

Valerosamente el Príncipe recogió el guante y supo ponerse a la altura de las circunstancias:

—Eso creo, si usted me proporciona la oportunidad. La señora Assingham repuso:

—Pues aquí la tiene.

La señora Assingham acababa de oír el ruido de un coche de alquiler al detenerse ante la puerta de su casa. Dijo:

—Ha regresado.

Capítulo III

Habían intercambiado las últimas frases en tono de chanza pero después esperaron a su amiga en silencio, y este silencio hizo el aire tenso, grave, y esta gravedad no se disipó ni cuando el Príncipe volvió a hablar. Había estado meditando el caso, para tomar una decisión inapelable. Una muchacha hermosa, inteligente y de carácter extraño, alojada en casa, era realmente una complicación. En este punto, la señora Assingham estaba en lo cierto. Pero también había otras circunstancias, como las buenas relaciones que unían a las dos muchachas desde los tiempos en que iban a la escuela, y la indudable confianza con que una de ellas había llegado. El Príncipe dijo:

—La señorita Stant puede venir a nuestra casa siempre que quiera.

La señora Assingham repuso con una nota de ironía oculta tras su risa:

—¿Le gustaría que les acompañara en la luna de miel?

—Bueno, no. Durante ese tiempo mejor que esté con usted, pero, luego, ¿por qué no ha de alojarse en nuestra casa?

La señora Assingham le miró largo rato en silencio. Después oyeron una voz en el corredor y se pusieron en pie. La señora Assingham dijo:

—¿Por qué no? ¡Muy generoso, por su parte!

Un instante después, Charlotte Stant estaba con ellos. Tras apearse del coche de alquiler, fue recibida y preparada para no encontrar sola a la señora Assingham —lo cual se advirtió en el comportamiento de Charlotte Stant— por la contestación que el mayordomo le dio a una pregunta que le hizo en los peldaños que llevaban a la puerta de la casa. Charlotte sólo hubiera podido mirar a la dueña de la casa de manera tan directa y optimista sabiendo que el Príncipe estaba allí; esto fue percepción tan sólo de un instante, pero permitió al Príncipe contemplarla todavía mejor de lo que habría hecho si la muchacha se hubiese dirigido a él inmediatamente. Sacó provecho de esta oportunidad que se le deparaba, teniendo conciencia de todo lo anterior. Lo que vio con intensidad, durante unos segundos, fue una muchacha alta, fuerte y dotada de gran encanto, que, al principio, tenía para él el aspecto de una aventurera. Toda su persona rezumaba en sus movimientos, en sus gestos, y en los auténticos y acertados detalles de su atuendo, desde la pequeñez del elegante sombrero hasta el color del cuero de sus zapatos, los vientos, olas y aduanas de lejanos países y largos viajes. Ella conocía la manera en que debía comportarse en distintos lugares y había adquirido el hábito, basado en la experiencia, de no tener miedo. Al mismo tiempo, el Príncipe se daba cuenta de que esta combinación no se debía, como hubiera podido suponer, a su «carácter fuerte». El Príncipe estaba ahora lo bastante familiarizado con las gentes de habla inglesa para percibir rápidamente estos matices. Además, ahora ya se había formado su propia opinión en lo tocante a la fortaleza del carácter de aquella muchacha. Tenía motivos para estimar que era grande, pero sabía que jamás formaría parte de su juego extremadamente personal y siempre gracioso. Esto último, que la muchacha expresaba al reaparecer allí, como si fuera una luz que de ella se desprendiera, era lo que el Príncipe necesitaba para refrescar sus preocupados ojos. Veía a la muchacha envuelta en su propia luz. Aquel saludo inmediato y exclusivo a la señora Assingham, su amiga común, fue como una antorcha que Charlotte Stant sostuviera en alto, en beneficio y para solaz del Príncipe. Todo se le hizo patente, sobre todo la presencia de Charlotte en el mundo, tan cercana, tan irremisiblemente contemporánea con la del Príncipe. Era una presencia vívida,

vívida, vívida, más vívida que la de su matrimonio, aunque acompañada y, en cierto modo subordinada y regulada, por aquella otra presencia, la de los rasgos faciales, su fisonomía, que la señora Assingham había considerado que daba lugar a opiniones contradictorias. Y al volver a verlos, advirtió el Príncipe que así era, y estos rasgos fueron los que establecieron un punto entre él y Charlotte Stant. Sí, por cuanto, si aquellos rasgos tenían que ser interpretados, ello comportaba por lo menos cierta intimidad. Y ciertamente, para el Príncipe, sólo había una manera de interpretarlos, teniendo en cuenta que se trataba de una realidad ya conocida.

Utilizando los torpes términos de la exageración, la cara era demasiado larga y estrecha, los ojos no muy grandes, la boca en modo alguno pequeña, con los labios carnosos, los dientes, bien dispuestos y destellantemente blancos, con una leve, levísima tendencia a sobresalir. Pero se daba la rara circunstancia de que todos estos rasgos de Charlotte Stant afectaban ahora al Príncipe como si se tratara de un conjunto de posesiones suyas, como artículos de larga lista, artículos reconocidos cada uno de ellos, después del largo período en que habían estado «almacenados», envueltos, numerados y guardados en un armario. Y mientras Charlotte Stant estaba frente a la señora Assingham, la puerta de aquel armario se había abierto por sí misma, y el Príncipe había sacado las reliquias, una a una. Y por momentos parecía que Charlotte Stant le concediera más tiempo para hacerlo. Volvió a advertir que el abundante cabello de Charlotte Stant era, vulgarmente hablando, castaño, aunque tuviera un ligero matiz dorado de hoja otoñal, propicio a las «opiniones contradictorias»; tenía un color indescriptible que jamás había visto en otro ser y que, en ciertos momentos le daba un aire de silvestre cazadora. El Príncipe vio que las mangas de la chaqueta de Charlotte Stant se ceñían a sus muñecas, pero adivinó, en el interior de las mangas, los brazos libres perfectamente torneados, con la pulimentada esbeltez que los escultores florentinos de los dorados tiempos amaban, y cuya clara firmeza queda expresada en sus obras de plata vieja y viejo bronce. Tuvo conciencia, en el momento en que dio media vuelta sobre sí misma, de las estrechas manos de Charlotte, de sus largos dedos, de la forma y el color de las uñas, de las líneas de la muchacha, de la especial belleza de sus movimientos, y de la perfecta armonía de todos sus miembros, como si se tratase de un instrumento maravillosamente acabado, como si fuera algo ideado amorosamente para ser expuesto, para ser ensalzado. Sobre todo tuvo conciencia de la extraordinaria esbeltez de su cintura, flexible como el tallo de una flor abierta, parecida también a una larga y móvil bolsa de seda, llena de monedas de oro, pero que, vacía, hubiera pasado por un anillo para ceñir el dedo, que la sujetara en su parte media. Antes de que Charlotte se volviera hacia él, pareció que él hubiera sostenido todo lo anterior en la palma de la mano, e incluso que hubiera oído un metálico tintineo. Cuando le miró, lo hizo de tal manera que él reconoció en su mirada lo que ella había estado haciendo. Charlotte no dio importancia a cómo se dirigió al Príncipe, con la salvedad de que la inteligencia de su rostro podía, en cualquier instante, dar significado a casi cualquier realidad. Si cuando se alejaba parecía una cazadora, cuando se acercaba tenía apariencia de la imagen, quizá no totalmente correcta, que el Príncipe se había forjado de una musa. Pero Charlotte dijo sencillamente:

—Ya ve que no puede librarse de mí. ¿Cómo está Maggie?

Pronto llegaría el momento, en méritos del natural discurso del azar, en que el joven Príncipe tendría la oportunidad de formular la pregunta propuesta por la señora Assingham poco antes de la llegada de Charlotte Stant. Dentro de pocos minutos se le daría ocasión al joven Príncipe que le permitiría literalmente preguntar a aquella señorita cuánto tiempo se quedaría con ellos. Y así fue como una cuestión de mero carácter doméstico determinó que la señora Assingham se retirara unos instantes, lo que dejó solos y en libertad a sus visitantes. La señora Assingham había preguntado a Charlotte: «¿Has visto a la señora Betterman?», aludiendo con ello a un miembro de la servidumbre que hubiera debido recibirla y hacer lo preciso para disponer de su equipaje en la casa. A lo cual Charlotte había contestado que sólo había visto al mayordomo, que se había comportado muy amablemente. Charlotte había suplicado que desecharan las preocupaciones que sus efectos personales pudieran causar, pero la dueña de la casa, levantándose del cúmulo de almohadones, vio, al parecer, en la ausencia de la señora Betterman una mayor gravedad de lo que a primera vista cabía suponer. Dicho en pocas palabras, lo que la señora Assingham vio exigía su intervención, a pesar del impulsivo: «¡Deje que vaya yo!» de la muchacha y del prolongado gemido sonriente que en ella provocó la molestia que causaba. En este momento, el Príncipe se dio perfecta cuenta de que lo más indicado era irse. Instalar a la señorita Stant no requería su presencia. La situación aconsejaba que uno se fuera, a no ser que tuviera alguna razón para quedarse. Pero el Príncipe tenía una razón, de la que tenía conciencia, hasta el punto de llevar ya bastante tiempo sin hacer nada tan consciente e intencionadamente como no despedirse rápidamente. Su visible insistencia —que tal llegó a ser— exigía

de él incluso cierto desagradable esfuerzo, esa clase de esfuerzos que el Príncipe asociaba principalmente a tener que actuar en obediencia a una idea. Y allí estaba su idea de averiguar algo, algo que en gran manera deseaba saber, y averiguarlo no mañana, ni en un próximo futuro; en resumen, no con esperas y dudas sino, caso de ser posible, antes de salir de aquella casa. Además, esta particular curiosidad se confundía un poco con la ocasión que se le ofrecía de satisfacer la curiosidad de la señora Assingham. El Príncipe jamás hubiera reconocido que se quedaba con el fin de formular una pregunta ruda, pues evidentemente ni el más leve matiz de rudeza concurría en las razones que tenía. En realidad, la rudeza consistiría en irse sin haber intercambiado unas breves palabras con aquella antigua amiga.

Y, efectivamente, hubo un breve intercambio de palabras por cuanto la ocupación de la señora Assingham había simplificado el problema. La pequeña crisis duró menos de lo que hemos tardado en contarla, ya que una más prolongada duración hubiera obligado al Príncipe a coger el sombrero. El Príncipe estaba ahora contento de encontrarse a solas con Charlotte y de no haber sido culpable de acto tan inconsecuente. No atropellarse era la clase de coherencia que él deseaba, coherencia que era, a su vez, una especie de dignidad. ¿Y cómo no iba a tener él dignidad, cuando gozaba de aquella tranquilidad de conciencia que es la base en que reposa esa virtud? Nada había hecho que no hubiera debido hacer. En realidad, nada había hecho. Era consciente, por ser hombre que había conocido a muchas mujeres, de que podría ser testigo, como él hubiera dicho, del reiterado y predestinado fenómeno de aquello tan seguro como el alba o la sucesión del santoral, consistente en que una mujer hiciera algo que la delatara. Charlotte lo hacía siempre fatalmente, infaliblemente, sin que pudiera evitarlo. Formaba parte de su naturaleza, de su vida, y el hombre podía esperarlo siempre, sin tener siquiera necesidad de levantar un dedo. Ésta era la posición del Príncipe, su posición y su fortaleza, como las de cualquier hombre: gozar de la ventaja de tener sólo que esperar, con decente paciencia, para quedar justificado, incluso a pesar de sí mismo. De la misma manera, la exactitud de la actuación del otro ser, el femenino, radicaba en su debilidad y su profunda desdicha, al mismo tiempo que en su belleza. Ello producía en el hombre aquella extraordinaria mezcla de lástima y provecho en que consistía su relación con la mujer, cuando el hombre no era meramente un bruto y le daba la más pertinente base para ser siempre amable con ella, siempre amable en todo lo referente a ella, siempre amable para ella. Desde luego, la mujer siempre disimulaba su actuación, le ponía sordina, la disfrazaba y la aderezaba, demostrando en estos disimulos una inteligencia que con nada del mundo se podía comparar, salvo con una cosa, con la propia miseria de la mujer, que por nada del mundo la mujer llegaría a revelar, si no fuera por la verdad de que estaba hecha. Esto era precisamente lo que ahora haría Charlotte Stant. Sin la menor duda, éstos eran el motivo y la base de cada una de sus miradas y cada uno de sus movimientos. Estaba predestinada a actuar así, y también a cuidar las apariencias, por lo que ahora lo único que interesaba al Príncipe era ver de qué manera iba a proceder Charlotte. El la ayudaría, colaboraría con ella en la medida que fuera razonable. Lo único importante era saber qué apariencias se podían salvar, y encubrir y conservarlas mejor. Salvarlas ella, desde luego, ya que el Príncipe, afortunadamente, no tenía que encubrir locura alguna por su parte, pues guardaba una perfecta armonía entre el comportamiento y el deber.

De todas maneras, he aquí que estaban los dos, cuando la puerta se cerró después de que saliera su común amiga, con una consciente y tensa sonrisa, como si cada uno esperase que el otro diera la pauta de la conducta a seguir. El joven Príncipe se contenía, en silenciosa espera, sintiendo en él el miedo que ella experimentaba, lo que no dejaba de tranquilizarle. La muchacha, sin embargo, se temía a sí misma, en tanto que él, por su mayor lucidez, sólo temía a la muchacha. ¿Se arrojaría ella en sus brazos, o llevaría a cabo alguna acción igualmente maravillosa? Esperaría a ver lo que él hacía, dijeron al Príncipe aquellos extraños momentos de silencio, y, entonces, ella reaccionaria en consecuencia. Pero ¿qué podía hacer él salvo dar a entender a la muchacha que estaba dispuesto a hacer lo preciso para que todo fuera para ella honorablemente fácil? Incluso en el caso de que se arrojara en sus brazos, el Príncipe lo consideraría como de carácter «fácil», es decir, lo convertiría en un hecho al que podría quitarse importancia fácilmente, que podría ignorarse, que podría olvidarse con facilidad y, al mismo tiempo y precisamente por ello, un hecho que en modo alguno sería de lamentar. Pero en realidad no ocurrió esto, aunque también es cierto que la tensión no menguó súbitamente, sino en sutil gradación.

Por fin, la muchacha dijo:

—¡Es delicioso estar de nuevo aquí!

Y esto fue cuanto le ofreció, lo cual no era más que lo que cualquier otra persona hubiera dicho. Sin embargo, dos o tres frases más que, basadas en las contestaciones del Príncipe, siguieron a ésta, marcaron

claramente el camino, en tanto que el tono de las palabras y la actitud general de la muchacha estuvieron tan alejados de la verdad de la situación cuanto era necesario. La pobreza, que ajuicio del Príncipe era esencial, no se abordó en modo alguno; no tardó en percatarse de que cabía confiar en la capacidad de aderezo de la muchacha, caso de que la muchacha se aderezara. Esto era cuanto él pedía y, por ello la admiraba tanto y tanto le gustaba. Las apariencias concretas que la muchacha había decidido encubrir, según las previsiones que se presuponen, eran las de no tener noticia alguna que darle, en realidad las de no tener noticia alguna que dar a nadie, de razones y motivos, de idas y venidas. Era una muchacha encantadora que había tratado anteriormente al Príncipe, pero también era encantadora con su propia vida. Y elevaría su vida, la elevaría más y más y más, siempre más. Pues bien, en este caso, el Príncipe haría lo mismo, no habría altura demasiado elevada para ellos, ni siquiera la más vertiginosa que una muchacha tan sutil pudiera concebir. La más vertiginosa pareció alcanzarla cuando, unos instantes después, estuvo a punto de disculparse por su súbita aparición:

—No hacía más que pensar en Maggie, y, al fin, ansiaba verla. Quería tener la certeza de que es feliz, y no me sorprende que usted no se atreva a decirme que realmente lo es.

Él repuso:

—¡Desde luego, es feliz, a Dios gracias! Pero la felicidad de los seres jóvenes, buenos y generosos es casi terrible. Llega incluso a dar miedo. Sin embargo, la Virgen Santísima y todos los santos protegen a Maggie.

—Ciertamente. Es el ser más bueno que hay en la Tierra, aunque, naturalmente, no hace falta que se lo diga.

Con gravedad, el Príncipe comentó:

—Tengo la impresión de que todavía me falta mucho para conocerla bien.

Inmediatamente, añadió a estas palabras las siguientes:

—Maggie se alegrará inmensamente de tenerla a usted entre nosotros.

Sonriendo, Charlotte dijo:

—¡No me necesitan! Ésta es la hora de Maggie. Es su gran hora. Todos sabemos lo que significa para una muchacha. Y ésta es precisamente la razón por la que he venido. Quiero decir que no quería perderme estos momentos.

Inclinando la cabeza, la miró con expresión amable y comprensiva:

—Nada debe usted perderse.

Había encontrado la pauta y ahora podía seguirla, ya que lo único que necesitaba anteriormente era hallarla. La pauta a seguir se basaba en la felicidad de su futura esposa, en la visión de esa felicidad en cuanto suponía de alegría para una antigua amiga. Esto resultaba magnífico, y su magnificencia no quedaba disimulada por el hecho de que le pareciera de repente noble y elevada la actitud de Charlotte. Cierta expresión en los ojos de la joven parecía decirle esto al Príncipe, parecía decirle por anticipado lo que hallaría en su comportamiento. El Príncipe también procuró darle a entender que ansiaba saber lo que Charlotte quería, teniendo en consideración, lo cual no le era difícil, lo que aquella amistad había significado para Maggie. Había sido una amistad dotada de las alas de la imaginación juvenil y de la juvenil generosidad. Consideraba que para Maggie esa amistad había sido, descontando siempre la intensa devoción que sentía por su padre, la más viva emoción que había experimentado antes de que alborease la inspirada por él. Que él supiera, Maggie no había invitado al objeto de esta amistad a su boda, no había pensado proponerle que hiciera un viaje tan largo y tan caro para las dos horas que duraría la ceremonia. Pero, a pesar de los trabajos y preparativos, Maggie había estado en contacto con Charlotte y la había mantenido informada semana tras semana. «He escrito a Charlotte; me gustaría que la conocieras mejor.» Todavía le parecía oír estas palabras en el curso de las últimas semanas, dando constancia del hecho, de la misma manera que tenía conciencia, con sensación de extrañeza, del elemento gratuito que concurría en el deseo de Maggie, de lo que, hasta el momento, no la había informado todavía. Siendo Charlotte mayor que ella y quizá más inteligente, ¿por qué razón Charlotte correspondía —y se sentía perfectamente libre de corresponder— con algo más que simples buenos modales? Las relaciones de las mujeres entre sí siempre son de lo más extraño que quepa imaginar, ciertamente, y el Príncipe ni siquiera habría confiado, en este aspecto, en una muchacha de su propia raza. El Príncipe meditaba concienzudamente, pensando en las diferencias raciales; se daba cuenta de lo difícil que era hallar las características raciales de aquella muchacha. En ella no había rasgo alguno que la clasificara desde este punto de vista. Era un ser raro, un producto especial. Su individualismo, su soledad, su carencia de medios, es decir, de parientes y otras ventajas, contribuían a enriquecerla, dotándola de una neutralidad rara y preciosa que constituía para ella,

tan aislada y tan perceptiva a un tiempo, algo parecido a un pequeño capital social. Era el único capital que tenía, el único capital que una muchacha sola y sociable podía tener; pero muy pocas jóvenes, sin la menor duda, habían llegado a conseguirlo en el mismo grado que ella, pues lo alcanzó mediante el ejercicio de un don de la naturaleza al que difícilmente cabía dar un nombre.

No consistía en el don insólito que aquella muchacha tenía para los idiomas, con los que jugaba como un prestidigitador juega a bolas, aros o antorchas encendidas, o, por lo menos, no consistía exclusivamente en esto; él había conocido a personas que como políglotas eran casi tan destacadas como Charlotte, pero cuyos conocimientos en manera alguna les conferían el carácter de personas interesantes. En realidad, también él era políglota, y lo mismo cabía decir de muchos de sus amigos y de sus conocidos. Pero el conocimiento de idiomas para estas personas, lo mismo que para él, no era más que un cómodo instrumento. Lo importante, en lo referente a Charlotte, consistía en que el conocimiento de idiomas constituía una belleza en sí mismo, casi un misterio. Esta sensación la había tenido más de una vez al advertir que sus labios tenían el don, que era la más insólita gracia social entre los bárbaros, de hablar el italiano con la mayor perfección. El Príncipe había conocido extranjeros —pocos y casi todos ellos hombres — que hablaban su idioma de manera agradable, pero no había conocido a hombre o mujer que diera muestras de tener el casi desconcertante instinto de Charlotte en el empleo del italiano. Recordaba que, cuando la conoció, ésta no le dijo que hablaba el italiano, como si el inglés y sólo el inglés del Príncipe, que en poco se diferenciaba del de Charlotte, fuera el inevitable medio de comunicación entre ambos. Accidentalmente, con ocasión de oírla hablar con otra persona, supo que tenía un medio de comunicación alternativo tan bueno como el anterior o, en realidad, mejor, por cuanto se divertía esperando que cometiera en italiano un desliz lingüístico que jamás cometió. La explicación que a este misterio daba Charlotte no era suficiente. No, no era suficiente su nacimiento en Florencia y su infancia florentina, sus padres, de aquel gran país, pero pertenecientes ya a una generación corrompida, desmoralizada, falsificada, asimismo políglotas, con la *balia* toscana, que era el primer recuerdo de Charlotte, los criados de la villa, los queridos *contadini* del *podere*, las niñas y los campesinos del *podere* contiguo. Todo el pobre pero muy humano entorno de los primeros años de Charlotte en el que no se debía olvidar a las buenas hermanas del pobre convento de la montaña toscana, el convento más pobre de cuantos había alrededor, pero también más bello, en el que había estudiado hasta el inicio de la fase siguiente, la fase mucho más importante correspondiente a la institución parisina a la que llegaría terriblemente atemorizada, siendo más joven que sus compañeras de clase, tres años antes de terminar unos estudios de cinco años de duración. Naturalmente, estos recuerdos no dejaban de ser una explicación, pero no impidieron que el Príncipe insistiera en que se notaba la presencia de un antepasado genuinamente italiano y, si Charlotte se empeñaba, de las montañas toscanas, una presencia imborrable en su sangre y en su acento. Ella ignoraba la existencia de este antepasado, pero escuchó con agrado su teoría, considerándola uno de los pequeños obsequios con los que la amistad florece. Sin embargo, todos estos hechos quedaron mezclados y confusos de manera natural, aunque cierto eco quedó al decir el Príncipe las palabras siguientes, en las que se daba nota de una sospecha que la discreción de éste permitía formular:

—¿Parece que no le ha gustado su país?

Por el momento, seguirían hablando en inglés. Charlotte Stant repuso:

—Mucho me temo que no me causa la impresión de ser mi país. Allí carece de importancia el que a uno le guste o no le guste el país. Se considera un asunto privado. Pero la verdad es que no me ha gustado. El Príncipe observó:

—Esto no es un gran estímulo para mí…

—¿Lo dice porque piensan ir allá?

—Desde luego, iremos. Siempre he sentido grandes deseos de ir. Charlotte, dubitativa, preguntó:

—¿Ahora? ¿Inmediatamente?

—Dentro de uno o dos meses. Éstos parecen ser los últimos proyectos. Después de decir estas palabras, vio en el rostro de Charlotte algo que ya había imaginado que vería y que le indujo a preguntar:

—¿No le escribió Maggie diciéndoselo?

—No me dijo que fueran inmediatamente. Desde luego, deben ir.

En tono claro y seguro, añadió:

—Y deben quedarse allí el mayor tiempo posible.

Riendo, el Príncipe le preguntó:

—¿Es esto lo que usted ha hecho? ¿Se ha quedado allí cuanto tiempo ha podido?

—Ésta es la impresión que tengo. Ahora bien, allí yo carezco de «intereses». Ustedes los tienen, y a gran escala. Es el país de los intereses. Si los tuviera, aunque fueran pocos, no me hubiese ido.

El Príncipe guardó silencio durante unos instantes. Estaban los dos todavía de pie y dijo:

—¿Sus intereses están aquí?

Sonriendo, la muchacha repuso:

—¡Mis intereses…! Poco lugar ocupan, estén donde estén.

La manera en que dijo estas palabras y el cambio que imprimieron en ella determinaron que el Príncipe dijera unas palabras que, pocos minutos antes, hubieran parecido un tanto gratuitas y de dudoso gusto. La insinuación contenida en lo dicho por Charlotte había alterado la situación, y él sintió realmente que se le levantaban los ánimos al descubrir que, en méritos de esa insinuación, un mundo honrado y real acudía a sus labios. Evidentemente, tanto para el uno como para la otra, en aquellas palabras se daba la máxima nota de valentía:

—Durante todo ese tiempo, he estado pensando que seguramente decidiría usted casarse.

Charlotte le miró durante unos instantes y, mientras transcurrían estos segundos, él temió haber estropeado gran parte de lo que hasta el momento quizá había conseguido. Charlotte dijo:

—¿Casarme? ¿Con quién?

—Pues con un norteamericano bueno, amable, inteligente, rico…

Una vez más, la seguridad del Príncipe peligró. Pero ella contestó de una manera que le pareció admirable:

—He procurado casarme con todos los hombres con quienes me tropecé. Hice todo lo que pude. Dije públicamente que había regresado con esa finalidad. Quizá me excedí, incluso. Pero de nada me sirvió. Tuve que reconocer mi fracaso. Nadie quiso casarse conmigo.

A continuación, pareció dar muestras de lamentar que el Príncipe hubiera tenido que escuchar palabras tan desconcertantes. Se apiadó de él y decidió animarle un poco, para sacarle de su desilusión. Sonriente, dijo:

—De todas maneras, como usted sabe, la existencia no depende de eso. De cazar marido, quiero decir.

Vagamente, el Príncipe dijo:

—Oh, la existencia…

—¿Cree que debería ambicionar algo más que la mera existencia? No veo razón alguna para que mi existencia, incluso reduciéndola todo lo que usted quiera a ser solamente mía, sea tan difícil. Puedo tener cierta clase de cosas, puedo ser ciertas cosas. La situación de una mujer sola es muy favorable en estos tiempos.

—¿Favorable para qué?

—Para existir. Y, a fin de cuentas, la existencia puede tener gran contenido, de una manera o de otra. En el peor de los casos, puede contener afectos. Sí, muy principalmente afectos, afectos centrados en amigos y amigas. Por ejemplo, quiero mucho a Maggie. La adoro. ¿Podría adorarla más si estuviera casada con un hombre del tipo a que usted se ha referido?

El Príncipe se echó a reír:

—¡Podría adorarle más a él!

—Es que no se trata sólo de eso.

—Mi querida amiga, se trata siempre de hacer cuanto uno pueda en beneficio de uno mismo sin perjudicar a los demás.

El Príncipe tenía la impresión de que ahora se encontraban en un terreno que representaba una base excelente. En consecuencia, prosiguió en un tono que parecía querer revelar la firmeza de su parecer.

—Por consiguiente, osaré expresar de nuevo mis esperanzas de que contraiga usted matrimonio con un hombre de valía. Y también repetiré mi convencimiento de que tal matrimonio será para usted más favorable, dicho sea con la palabra por usted utilizada, que el espíritu de nuestros tiempos.

Al principio pareció que Charlotte, por toda respuesta, se limitaría a mirarle, causando la impresión de aceptar humildemente sus palabras, si no hubiera sido por cierta expresión indicativa de que las había tomado alegremente.

Entonces dijo sencillamente:

—Muchísimas gracias.

En aquel instante, la dueña de la casa volvió a entrar. De forma patente, en el momento en que la señora Assingham entró, su mirada saltó con sonriente penetración de una a otra cara, y quizá fue la percepción de

esa mirada lo que indujo a Charlotte, deseosa de equilibrar la situación, a incorporar a la señora Assingham a la conversación sostenida momentos antes:

—El Príncipe todavía tiene grandes esperanzas de que me case con una buena persona.

Fuera cual fuese el efecto que estas palabras causaron en la señora Assingham, el Príncipe se sintió tranquilizado, más seguro que en cualquier otro instante. Dicho de otra manera, estaba a salvo. Esto era lo que implicaba la actitud de Charlotte. Él necesitaba sentirse seguro. Ahora se sentía tan seguro que podría permitir casi todo género de bromas. Explicó a la dueña de la casa:

—He hablado así debido a lo que la señorita Stant me ha estado diciendo. Creo que debemos levantarle los ánimos, ¿verdad?

La broma era de mal gusto, pero todavía no había comenzado, como tal broma, y así lo había comprendido la señora Assingham. Él prosiguió:

—La señorita Stant ha intentado casarse en Norteamérica, pero nada ha conseguido.

Su tono no fue el que la señora Assingham habría esperado de él, pero contestó de la mejor manera que pudo, diciéndole:

—Si tan interesado está en este asunto, consígalo usted.

Impertérrita, Charlotte dijo a la señora Assingham:

—Y usted debe ayudarle, querida. En anteriores ocasiones su ayuda ha sido muy valiosa.

Después de decir estas palabras, y antes de que la señora Assingham pudiera darles la debida contestación, se volvió hacia el Príncipe para abordar un tema que le afectaba mucho más de cerca:

—Su matrimonio ¿se celebrará el viernes o el sábado?

—¿El viernes? ¡No! ¿Por quién nos toma? Hemos evitado todos los malos augurios, aun los más vulgares. El sábado, en el Oratorio, a las tres en punto, ante doce personas exactamente.

—¿Doce incluyéndome a mí?

Estas palabras le sorprendieron. Se echó a reír:

—Usted sería la número trece. ¡No puede ser!

Charlotte dijo:

—Efectivamente, si es que se rige por augurios. ¿Desea que no asista?

—Dios mío… Procuraremos solucionarlo. Invitaremos a una vieja para que seamos catorce. Supongo que habrá alguna disponible para estar allí.

En realidad, el regreso de la señora Assingham había determinado, al fin, el momento en que el Príncipe debía partir. Volvió a coger el sombrero y se acercó a la señora Assingham para despedirse. Dirigiéndose a Charlotte, dijo:

—Esta noche ceno con el señor Verver, ¿desea que le transmita algún mensaje?

La muchacha pareció dudar unos instantes:

—¿Un mensaje para el señor Verver?

—Para Maggie, a fin de que puedan verse pronto. Me consta que a Maggie le gustará verla.

—Pues sí, dígale que iré a verla mañana por la mañana.

—Maggie mandará un coche para recogerla.

—No, gracias, no hace falta.

Dirigiéndose a la señora Assingham, Charlotte preguntó:

—El ómnibus cuesta un penique, ¿verdad?

Mientras la señora Assingham miraba inexpresivamente a Charlotte, el Príncipe exclamó:

—¡Ah, bueno…!

La dueña de la casa dijo a su amiga:

—Sí, querida, y yo le daré el penique.

La señora Assingham se dirigió al Príncipe:

—No se preocupe, que llegará.

Pero Charlotte, en el momento en que éste se despedía de ella, tuvo una nueva idea:

—Príncipe, deseo pedirle un gran favor. Antes del sábado quiero hacer un regalo de boda a Maggie.

El joven Príncipe, asintiendo una vez más, dijo:

—¡Bueno…!

Charlotte prosiguió:

—¡No sabe cuánto lo deseo! En realidad he venido con este fin. En América no podía conseguir lo que quiero regalarle.

La señora Assingham dio muestras de ansiedad:

—¿Y qué desea regalarle?

La muchacha dijo, sin apartar la vista de él:

—Espero que el Príncipe tenga la bondad de ayudarme a elegir el regalo.

La señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿Y yo no puedo ayudarla?

Fija aún la mirada en el Príncipe, repuso:

—Ciertamente, querida, nos reuniremos todos para hablar del asunto. Pero quisiera que el Príncipe me acompañara a ver objetos de regalo. Quiero que juzgue juntamente conmigo y que elija. Éste, si es que puede disponer del tiempo preciso, es el gran favor que le pido.

Él levantó las cejas y esbozó una maravillosa sonrisa:

—¿Vino de América para pedirme esto? ¡En ese caso debo encontrar el tiempo que sea preciso!

El Príncipe sonreía maravillosamente, pero sonreía más de lo que se había propuesto. Su sonrisa discordaba de los restantes aspectos de su compostura de tal manera que de ningún modo constituía una nota de seguridad para el Príncipe. Y, en el mejor de los casos, sólo cabía considerar segura su sonrisa si se la interpretaba como una nota de publicidad. Entonces, rápidamente, se dio cuenta de que este aspecto de publicidad era el que más le convenía. Al instante siguiente, le pareció que era esa publicidad lo que más deseaba, por cuanto ¿acaso la publicidad no era lo que situaba la relación con Charlotte en la forma más correcta? Comprendió la señora Assingham que el Príncipe necesitaba su apoyo e inmediatamente le dio a entender que podía contar con ella y que estimaba correcta la posición que había adoptado. Riendo, la señora Assingham dijo:

—¡Ciertamente, Príncipe, debe encontrar el tiempo preciso!

Y estas palabras fueron, en realidad, la licencia expresamente concedida por la señora Assingham a modo de representación del juicio de una amiga, de la opinión pública, del margen de libertad tolerado a un futuro marido, o lo que fuere. De este modo, el Príncipe, después de decir a Charlotte que, si iba por la mañana a Portland Place, haría cuanto estuviera en su mano para encontrarse allí a fin de poder verla y decidir el momento de acompañarla, se despidió albergando la firme creencia de saber, como él decía, dónde se encontraba. Lo cual era la razón por la que había prolongado su visita. Y se encontraba precisamente en un lugar en el que podía permanecer.

Capítulo IV

El coronel Assingham dijo a su esposa la noche de la jornada aquella en que llegó Charlotte:

—Me encuentro en el caso de tener que decirte, querida, que no veo por qué razón, incluso dando a los hechos la interpretación más pesimista, te lo tomas tan a pecho. A fin de cuentas, no es tuya la culpa. Por otra parte, así me ahorquen si la culpa es mía.

La noche estaba ya avanzada, la señorita que había desembarcado en Southampton aquella mañana para llegar con el «vapor especial», que se había alojado en un hotel sólo para volver a alojarse un par de horas después en una casa particular, se encontraba en estos momentos, según esperaban los esposos Assingham, descansando pacíficamente de sus hazañas. A la cena habían asistido dos hombres, compañeros de armas y algo zarandeados de los mismos tiempos del coronel, a quienes la señora Assingham había invitado, un tanto negligentemente, el día anterior; cuando los caballeros, después de la cena, volvieron a reunirse con las señoras en la sala, Charlotte ya se había retirado, alegando fatiga. Sin embargo, los chasqueados guerreros se quedaron hasta tocadas las once. La señora Assingham, a pesar de que, como ella decía, no se hacía ilusión alguna en lo tocante al modo de ser de los militares, invitaba y chasqueaba constantemente a viejos soldados. Y, como quiera que el coronel había llegado, antes de la cena, con el tiempo justo para cambiarse de ropa, hasta el presente no había sido convocado por su cónyuge para examinar la situación que, como ahora acababa de saber, la llegada de su invitada había creado. Habían tocado ya las doce, la servidumbre había recibido autorización para retirarse, por la ventana abierta al aire agosteño, había dejado de penetrar el ruido del tráfico de la calle; él había estado durante todo este tiempo enterándose de lo que debía enterarse. Las palabras consignadas más arriba, emitidas por Robert Assingham, representan, por el momento, la esencia de su espíritu y de su actitud. Declinaba, y así se condenara si no lo hacía —expresiones ambas que utilizaba reiteradamente—, todo género de responsabilidad. Pese a ser el hombre más sencillo, más sensato y más cortés que quepa imaginar, el coronel se entregaba habitualmente a los excesos verbales. En cierta ocasión, su esposa, refiriéndose al habla impetuosa del coronel, le dijo que semejantes excesos le inducían a acordarse de cierto general retirado al que una vez vio jugando con soldaditos de juguete, librando y ganando batallas, sitiando plazas y aniquilando enemigos, con pequeñas fortalezas de madera y pequeños ejércitos de soldaditos de plomo. El exagerado énfasis de su marido era su caja de soldados de juguete, su juego militar. Satisfacía inocentemente en su vejez su instinto militar. Las palabras fuertes, en número suficiente y debidamente dispuestas para que produjeran mayor efecto, podían representar batallones, escuadrones, tremendas andanadas y gloriosas cargas de caballería. Era natural, era delicioso, representaba para él, y también para ella, el encanto de la vida de campamento, del perpetuo rugir de los cañones. Significaba luchar hasta el final, luchar hasta la muerte, sin matar a nadie.

Sin embargo, menos afortunado que su esposa, a pesar de la riqueza de su léxico, el coronel aún no había encontrado la imagen que expresara el juego favorito de la señora Assingham. Lo único que el coronel podía hacer era dejar que jugara a su propio juego, emulando con ello la filosofía que ella tenía con respecto a él. Muchas eran las noches en que el coronel estaba hasta la madrugada analizando las situaciones que con tanta abundancia se planteaban en la conciencia de su esposa; pero jamás había dejado de alegar que nada había en la vida, nada había en el vivir de su esposa, que pudiera constituir una situación para él. La señora Assingham podía hallarse en cincuenta situaciones si quería, lo cual es a fin de

cuentas lo que gusta a las mujeres ya que, cuando se cansan de una situación, siempre hay un hombre, de lo cual tienen clara conciencia, que las saca del apuro. De todas maneras, el coronel no estaba dispuesto, pasara lo que pasare, a encontrarse en una situación, fuera la que fuere, que se le hiciera propia y ni siquiera a participar en una situación con su esposa. En consecuencia, contemplaba cómo su mujer se desenvolvía en su elemento favorito, igual que a veces había contemplado en el acuario a aquella celebrada señora que con un breve y ceñido traje de baño daba volteretas y hacía otros ejercicios parecidos en aquel tanque de agua que tan frío e incómodo parecía a quienes no fueran anfibios. Aquella noche, el coronel escuchaba a su cónyuge mientras fumaba su última pipa y la observaba en el curso de su demostración, igual que si hubiera pagado un chelín para ello. Sin embargo, era cierto que esperaba la debida compensación del desembolso. ¿De qué diablos se mostraba tan inclinada a sentirse responsable? ¿Qué imaginaba que iba a ocurrir? Y, en el peor de los casos, ¿qué podía hacer aquella pobre muchacha, en el supuesto de que quisiera hacer algo? ¿Y qué cabía imaginar que la muchacha se propusiera?

La señora Assingham replicó:

—Si Charlotte me lo hubiera dicho en el momento de llegar, no me encontraría ahora en el caso de tener que averiguarlo. Pero no ha sido tan amable y no veo indicios de que llegue a serlo. Lo cierto es que para algo ha venido. No habrá venido para nada, creo yo.

Despacio, sin prisas, prosiguió:

—Quiere volver a ver al Príncipe. Y esto no es lo que me preocupa. Quiero decir que este hecho, en cuanto tal, no me preocupa, pero no dejo de preguntarme ¿para qué quiere verle?

—¿Y de qué te sirve hacerte esta pregunta si sabes que no lo sabes?

El coronel se reclinó cómodamente en el asiento, descansando un tobillo en la rodilla de la otra pierna, con la vista atentamente fija en la imagen de su pie, extremadamente esbelto, que meneaba constantemente, enfundado en fina seda negra y zapato de charol. Este miembro de su cuerpo parecía confesar que tenía conciencia de la disciplina militar, pues todo en él era tan pulido y perfecto, tan recto, ceñido y bien dispuesto, como un soldado en un desfile. Aquel pie llegaba incluso a decir, indirectamente, que si no se hallara en el estado en que se hallaba, alguien «le habría llevado» algo, como, por ejemplo, la prohibición de salir del cuartel o la retención de la paga. Bob Assingham se distinguía, de muy notable manera, por la esbeltez de su persona, una esbeltez que nada tenía que ver con la decadencia física y que quizá fue decretada por poderes superiores en vista a las necesidades de transportes y alojamiento, y que en realidad lindaba con lo anormal. Sus amigos sabían perfectamente que Bob Assingham «se cuidaba bien», pero a pesar de eso seguía escuálido y flaco, con cavidades faciales y abdominales de muy triste efecto, con la consecuente flacidez de las diversas prendas que vestía; todo esto, combinado con la afición a la telas de extraños colores claros y textura pajiza con cierto parecido a las esteras chinas, que provocaban curiosidad respecto a la fuente de suministro, inducía a pensar en largas estancias en las islas tropicales, en un omnipresente sillón de asiento de caña entretejida, en el cargo de gobernador colonial, ejercido en amplios porches. Su cabeza redonda y suave, con el especial matiz de su cabello blanco, parecía un macetero de plata puesto boca abajo. Sus pómulos y su erizado bigote eran dignos de Atila, el azote de Dios. Las cuencas de sus ojos eran profundas y tenebrosas, pero los ojos que en ellas se alojaban parecían azules florecillas cortadas esa misma mañana. Sabía todo lo que se puede conocer acerca de la vida, que, en su mayor parte, consideraba cuestión de carácter pecuniario. Su esposa le acusaba de carencia de reacciones morales o intelectivas, o, mejor dicho, de una total incapacidad para entrambas. El coronel Assingham ni siquiera llegaba a comprender el significado de las palabras de su esposa, lo cual carecía de toda importancia debido a que, a pesar de sus limitaciones, podía comportarse como un ser perfectamente sociable. Las penalidades de los hombres, sus lacras y deficiencias no le sorprendían ni le impresionaban; incluso cabía decir, lo cual quizá fue su única pérdida verdadera a lo largo de una vida de ahorro, que las escaseces le divertían. Sin horror, daba por sentadas las penalidades, las clasificaba según sus tipos y calculaba sus consecuencias y las oportunidades que ofrecían. Quizá en antiguos climas rigurosos, en viejas campañas de crueldad y licencia había tenido tales revelaciones y había conocido tales asombros que ya nada le quedaba por aprender. Sin embargo, era hombre totalmente satisfecho, a pesar de su afición a emplear términos subidos de tono en las discusiones domésticas. Y, cosa rarísima, su amabilidad parecía no guardar relación alguna con las experiencias de su pasado. Sabía enfrentarse perfectamente con las realidades, en la medida que le era necesario, sin acercarse a ellas.

Ésta era la manera como trataba a su esposa, de cuyas palabras, por lo menos en gran parte, hacía caso omiso. En beneficio de la economía generalmente considerada, recortaba y reducía el pensamiento de su

mujer, de la misma manera que recortaba por ahorro, mediante tachaduras hechas con el último resto de un lápiz, los telegramas de la señora Assingham. Entre cuantas realidades había en el mundo, para él la menos misteriosa era la administración de su casa, que llevaba quizá con excesiva atención y con perfecto conocimiento de causa. Sus relaciones con esta realidad eran un cumplido ejemplo del arte de efectuar recortes. Y, volviendo al tema que nos ocupa, éste era precisamente el proceso que el coronel hubiera aplicado de buena gana a los pareceres de la señora Assingham acerca del problema que tenían ante ellos, a saber, sus relaciones con las posibilidades de Charlotte Stant. No, no debían invertir íntegramente en ellas su pequeña fortuna de curiosidad y de alarma. Ciertamente, no iban a gastarse precisamente en ellas sus queridos ahorros tan pronto. Además, el coronel Assingham simpatizaba con Charlotte, invitada ordenada y de fácil trato, quien, a su juicio, se parecía a él más de lo que pudiera parecerse su esposa, gracias a esa manera de ser de Charlotte, que tan eficazmente evitaba el despilfarro. El coronel Assingham podía hablar con ella sobre Fanny casi mejor de lo que podía hablar con Fanny sobre Charlotte. Sin embargo, por el momento, procuró ayudar en la medida de lo posible a su esposa, llegando incluso a formular la pregunta que hemos consignado anteriormente. Ahora prosiguió:

—Si no puedes saber de qué has de tener miedo, espera a poder saberlo para tener miedo. Entonces verás cómo todo se desarrolla mucho mejor. 0, por el contrario, si ello presupone esperar demasiado, pregúntaselo a ella. No a mí. A ella, a ella.

Como sabemos, la señora Assingham negaba que su marido fuera capaz de pensar, lo cual le permitió considerar estas observaciones como si se tratara de movimientos físicos sin sentido o de contorsiones nerviosas del rostro. Por costumbre y por amabilidad, hizo caso omiso de ellas. Sin embargo, nadie había en el mundo con quien hablara tan insistentemente de tan íntimos asuntos como con el coronel Assingham.

Como si hablara consigo misma, la señora Assingham musitó:

—Su amistad con Maggie constituye la gran complicación, debido precisamente a lo natural que es.

—Si es una complicación, ¿a qué se debe que Charlotte busque la amistad de Maggie?

La señora Assingham siguió meditando:

—Se debe a que Charlotte odia América. No había sitio para ella allí, no encajaba en el país. Carecía de simpatías allí las gentes con quienes trataba tampoco le tenían simpatía. Además, aquel país es horrorosamente caro. Con sus medios, no podía comenzar a vivir allí. Ni puede hacerlo aquí, salvo con carácter excepcional.

—El carácter excepcional no consistirá en vivir con nosotros, supongo yo.

—No puede vivir con nosotros ni con nadie. Ésta es la verdad. No puede vivir constantemente de visita en casas ajenas. Y además tampoco quiere.

Incluso en el caso de que pudiera, la nobleza de su carácter se lo impediría. Pero, tarde o temprano, forzosamente vivirá invitada en casa de ellos. Maggie la invitará, Maggie la obligará. Además, la propia Charlotte sentirá deseos de que la inviten.

El coronel preguntó:

—En este caso, ¿por qué no aceptas que éste es el fin con el que Charlotte ha venido?

Igual que si no le hubiera oído, la señora Assingham prosiguió:

—No es posible, no es posible… Y por esto no hago más que dudar y dudar.

—Pues a mí me parece una solución perfecta.

Ella siguió meditando:

—Dudo y me pregunto si no habrá resucitado ahora una parte del pasado. ¿Cómo va a ser posible?

—Pues me atrevo a decir que será perfectamente posible sin necesidad de que te tortures y te retuerzas las manos.

Después de decir estas palabras, el coronel dio una chupada a la pipa; tan pronto como pudo, prosiguió:

—Querida, ¿te has encontrado alguna vez en el caso de que algo proyectado por ti, ideado por ti, resulte imposible?

Estas palabras provocaron la inmediata contestación de su esposa:

—¡Esto no lo proyecté yo! ¡No, yo no he traído aquí a Charlotte!

—¿Esperabas que la muchacha se quedara allí toda la vida, sólo para complacerte?

—Ni mucho menos. No me hubiera preocupado en absoluto su llegada después del matrimonio. Que haya venido antes del matrimonio es lo que me preocupa.

Incongruentemente, añadió:

—Lo lamento por ella, lo lamento mucho. Desde luego, no le gustará. Realmente, no sé qué extraña

perversidad la ha poseído. No tenía necesidad alguna de enfrentarse cara a cara con ese matrimonio, y supongo que no lo hace simplemente para disciplinarse. Casi equivale, y esto es lo más molesto, a aplicarme la disciplina a mí.

Bob Assingham dijo:

—Quizá lo haya hecho con ese fin. Por el amor de Dios, acéptalo como un acto disciplinario y da por terminado el asunto.

Después de una pausa, añadió:

—También yo lo aceptaré así.

Sin embargo, Fanny Assingham estaba muy lejos de dar por terminado el asunto. Como ella decía, se trataba de una situación con muchas facetas, ninguna de las cuales cabía, en justicia, no considerar.

Luego declaró:

—Y quiero que sepas que no creo que la chica sea mala. No, jamás, jamás pensaré eso de ella.

—Bueno, pues bástete eso.

No, nada le bastaba a la señora Assingham, salvo seguir pensando.

Ahora, dijo:

—No se propone deliberadamente, ni desea conscientemente, plantear la más leve complicación. Es totalmente cierto que, a su juicio, Maggie es un ser adorable. ¿Y quién no piensa así? Charlotte es incapaz de hacerle el menor daño.

Y concluyó:

—Pero aquí está Charlotte y aquí están los otros dos.

El coronel volvió a fumar en silencio durante un rato. Por fin preguntó:

—¿Qué diablos pasó entre esos dos?

—¿Entre Charlotte y el Príncipe? Pues nada… Que se dieron cuenta de que nada podía pasar entre ellos. Ésa fue su pequeña aventura romántica, ésa su pequeña tragedia.

—Pero ¿qué hicieron?

—¿Hicieron? Enamorarse el uno del otro, pero al ver que no era posible renunciaron mutuamente.

—¿Y dónde está la aventura romántica?

—En su frustración, en tener la valentía de enfrentarse con la realidad.

El coronel prosiguió su interrogatorio:

—¿Qué realidad?

—Bueno, pues, para empezar, ninguno de los dos tenía los medios precisos para contraer matrimonio. Si ella hubiera tenido algo, un poco, un poco para vivir los dos, quiero decir, creo que él hubiera tenido la valentía de casarse.

Después de esto, como su marido se había limitado a emitir un vago y extraño sonido, corrigió sus palabras:

—Quiero decir si él hubiera tenido algo, un poco, un poco más que un poco, un poco para un Príncipe.

Meditó y trató con justicia a la pareja:

—En este caso, habrían hecho lo que hubieran podido, si hubiera habido modo. Pero no había modo, y Charlotte tuvo la nobleza, a mi parecer, de reconocerlo. El Príncipe necesitaba dinero. Era una cuestión de vida o muerte. Además, no habría sido divertido, ni mucho menos, casarse con él, siendo éste un pobre de solemnidad, quiero decir, permitiendo que siguiera siéndolo. Esto es lo que ella —y él— tuvieron la sensatez de comprender.

—¿Y esto es lo que tú llamas aventura romántica?

La señora Assingham le miró en silencio, durante unos instantes, y preguntó:

—¿Qué más quieres?

—¿Y él no quiso nada más? ¿Y la pobre Charlotte tampoco?

Le miró fijamente de una manera que casi era, en sí misma, una respuesta. Luego dijo:

—Estaban profundamente enamorados. Charlotte hubiera podido ser su… Pero se contuvo. Estuvo desorientada durante un momento y dijo:

—Habría podido ser lo que hubiera querido, salvo su esposa. Envuelto en humo, el coronel replicó:

—Pero no lo fue.

Como un eco, ella repuso:

—Pero no lo fue.

Este eco, profundo, aunque no ruidoso, llenó durante unos instantes el cuarto. El coronel causó la

impresión de prestar oído al eco en espera de que se desvaneciera. Luego, preguntó:

—¿Y cómo puedes estar tan segura?

Ella esperó unos instantes antes de contestar, pero cuando contestó lo hizo con firmeza:

—No tuvieron tiempo.

Esta razón provocó una corta carcajada en el coronel, quien, por lo visto, esperaba otra razón. Éste dijo:

—¿Tanto tiempo hace falta?

Pero la señora Assingham siguió seria y repuso:

—Más del que ellos tuvieron a su disposición.

El coronel se mantuvo impertérrito, aunque quedó un tanto intrigado:

—¿Qué les pasó con el asunto del tiempo?

Estas palabras no suscitaron respuesta alguna de la señora Assingham, quien pareció sumida en los recuerdos, en volver a vivirlos y en atar los cabos sueltos. El coronel le preguntó:

—¿Quieres decir que interviniste tú con tu idea?

Estas palabras centraron su atención en aquel aspecto concreto del tema y, en cierta medida, le permitieron contestar.

—Ni mucho menos, en aquel entonces.

Después de un breve silencio, añadió:

—Supongo que recordarás lo que ocurrió hace un año. El Príncipe y Charlotte se alejaron el uno del otro sin que él hubiera oído hablar siquiera aún de Maggie.

—¿Es que la propia Charlotte no le había hablado de ella?

—No, nunca le había hablado de ella.

—¿Es esto lo que te ha dicho?

—No estoy hablando de lo que ella me ha dicho. Punto. Estoy hablando de lo que sé por mí misma. Punto.

En tono más conciliador, Bob Assingham preguntó:

—En otras palabras, ¿piensas que te mintió?

La señora Assingham dio a estas palabras el negligente tratamiento que se da a las groserías:

—En aquel entonces ni siquiera mencionó a Maggie.

Había hablado con tal seguridad, que el coronel pareció quedar impresionado. Preguntó:

—Entonces, ¿ha sido él quien te lo ha dicho?

Después de unos instantes, la señora Assingham confesó:

—Ha sido él.

—¿Y este hombre no miente?

—No, en justicia debo decir que no. Creo que nunca miente.

Para justificarse de manera vaga y general, añadió:

—Si no le hubiera creído, no habría querido tener el más leve trato con él; quiero decir, en relación con el asunto que nos ocupa. Pero el Príncipe es un caballero; quiero decir que es tan caballero como se debe ser. Y, además, nada podía ganar mintiendo, lo cual siempre ayuda a un caballero a portarse como un caballero. Yo fui quien le habló de Maggie, en mayo hizo un año. El Príncipe jamás había oído hablar de ella. El coronel observó:

—En este caso, es grave.

Dubitativa, la señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿Grave para mí, quieres decir?

—Que todo es grave para ti lo hemos dado por supuesto desde un principio y, fundamentalmente, de eso estamos hablando. Quiero decir que es grave, o lo fue, para Charlotte. Y es grave para Maggie. Mejor dicho, lo fue cuando el Príncipe la conoció. 0 cuando ella conoció al Príncipe.

—No puedes atormentarme tanto como quisieras, debido a que no piensas en nada en lo que yo no haya pensado mil veces ya, y debido a que yo pienso en cosas en las que tú jamás pensarás. Todo habría sido grave si no hubiera sido impecable.

Dichas estas palabras, observó:

—No caes en la cuenta de que llegamos a Roma a finales de febrero. El coronel le dio toda la razón:

—En esta vida, no caigo en la cuenta de nada.

Sin embargo, era evidente que ella caía en la cuenta de todo en esta vida, cuando era necesario. Ahora dijo:

—Charlotte, que había estado en Roma aquella temporada, desde noviembre, se fue repentinamente, como recordarás, hacia el diez de abril. Debía quedarse más tiempo, debía quedarse porque nosotros estábamos allí. Y, con más razón todavía, debía quedarse porque los Verver, que fueron esperados durante todo el invierno, pero cuya llegada se demoró semana tras semana porque no acababan de decidirse a dejar París, por fin iban a trasladarse realmente a Roma. E iban a Roma, mejor dicho, Maggie iba a Roma, principalmente para ver a Charlotte y, sobre todo, para estar con ella allí. Pero Charlotte se fue a Florencia, con lo que todo quedó trastornado. Se fue de la noche a la mañana. No recuerdas nada. Dio sus razones, pero en aquel entonces la actitud de Charlotte me pareció rara. Tuve la sensación de que algo había ocurrido. El problema consistía en que, a pesar de que yo sabía un poco de lo ocurrido, no sabía lo suficiente. Ignoraba que la relación de Charlotte con el Príncipe hubiera sido una cosa «gorda», como tú dices, es decir, ignoraba lo «gorda» que había sido. La partida de la pobre chica fue una huida. Se fue para salvarse.

El coronel había escuchado más atentamente de lo que había dado a entender, como se dedujo por el tono en que preguntó:

—¿Para salvarse?

—Bueno y también, a mi parecer, para salvar al Príncipe. Lo comprendí después. Sí, ahora lo veo muy claro. El Príncipe no quería causar daño a Charlotte.

Riendo, el coronel observó:

—¡Por lo general, no se quiere causar daño!

Ella prosiguió:

—De todas maneras, Charlotte huyó. Los dos huyeron. Sí, porque sencillamente tenían que enfrentarse con la realidad. Su matrimonio era imposible y, por ello, cuanto antes pusieran los Apeninos por medio, mejor. Cierto es que tardaron un poco en darse cuenta. Durante todo aquel invierno se vieron constantemente, y no siempre en público. Se vieron mucho más de lo que la gente sabía, aunque se sabía mucho. Desde luego, más de lo que yo imaginaba, aun cuando, si lo hubiera sabido con exactitud, en nada me hubiese afectado. El Príncipe me gustó, me pareció encantador desde el instante en que le conocí. Y, ahora, después de conocerle desde hace más de un año, no ha hecho nada que pueda inducirme a variar de parecer. En consecuencia, tengo fe en él y, al principio, acerté al pensar que tendría fe en él.

A continuación, la señora Assingham declaró, en el mismo tono que hubiera empleado al dar el resultado de una suma cuyas columnas hubieran estado escritas en una pizarra:

—En consecuencia, no me he portado como una tonta.

Bob Assingham dijo:

—¿Acaso insinúas que yo haya dicho que te has portado como tal? De todas maneras, en este problema lo único que tienes que hacer es no intervenir. Ahora es suyo, de ellos, lo compraron y lo pagaron. Ha dejado de ser tuyo.

—¿A qué problema te refieres?

El coronel fumó en silencio, gimió y dijo:

—¿Tantos problemas hay que es preciso que concrete a cuál me refiero?

—Está el problema de Maggie y el Príncipe, y está el problema del Príncipe y Charlotte.

Burlón, el coronel observó:

—Y también está el de Charlotte y el Príncipe.

La señora Assingham siguió con su lista:

—Está el problema de Maggie y Charlotte, y también está el problema de Maggie y yo. Y me parece que está el de Charlotte y yo. Meditativa añadió:

—Sí, lo de Charlotte y yo es todo un problema. En resumen, como puedes ver, hay muchos problemas. Pero estoy dispuesta a no perder la cabeza.

El coronel preguntó:

—¿Y vamos a resolver todos los problemas esta noche?

—La perdería si las cosas hubieran ocurrido de otra manera, si hubiera cometido una imprudencia.

Absorta, haciendo caso omiso de la pregunta del coronel, la señora Assingham siguió con lo suyo:

—No, no podría hacer frente a la situación actualmente. Pero mi honradez es mi fortaleza. Nadie puede acusarme. Los Verver llegaron solos a Roma. Charlotte, después de pasar unos días con ellos en Florencia, decidió regresar a América. Me atrevo a creer que Maggie la ayudó, seguramente le hizo un regalo, un regalo cuantioso, lo que facilitó muchas cosas. Charlotte se separó de los Verver, vino a Inglaterra y, en

compañía de alguien, embarcó para Nueva York. Todavía conservo la carta que me mandó desde Milán, diciéndomelo. A la sazón ignoraba lo que había detrás de aquella carta, pero tuve la impresión de que revelaba la intención de comenzar una nueva vida. De todas maneras, no cabe duda de que aquello despejó un poco la atmósfera allí, quiero decir la atmósfera en que estábamos sumidos en la querida y vieja Roma. El campo quedó libre, tuve carta blanca. Cuando hice lo preciso para que los dos se conocieran, no tenía que pensar en una tercera persona. Más aún, tampoco ellos tenían que pensar en otra persona.

La señora Assingham concluyó:

—Con lo cual puedes ver perfectamente la posición en que me encuentro.

Después de decir estas palabras, la señora Assingham se levantó como si la luz azul del día hubiera avanzado tenazmente a lo largo de un tenebroso túnel; la nota de satisfacción en su voz, así como su recuperada vivacidad, bien hubieran podido representar el agudo silbido del tren que, por fin, sale disparado del túnel al campo abierto. Dio unos pasos por la estancia y contempló durante unos instantes la noche agosteña. Se detuvo varias veces, aquí y allá, ante las flores en jarrones y búcaros. Sí, parecía evidente que la señora Assingham había demostrado algo que era preciso demostrar, parecía que el resultado de sus actividades había sido, casi de improviso, un éxito. Los viejos cálculos quizá fueron falsos, pero los nuevos dejaban la cuestión resuelta. Sin embargo, su marido, lo cual no dejaba de ser cosa un tanto rara, siguió en su sitio, quieto, como si no se hubiera dado cuenta de aquel resultado. De la misma manera que la intensidad del estado de ánimo de su esposa le había divertido anteriormente, el actual alivio de su cónyuge no le había levantado los ánimos. Y bien podía darse el caso de que hubiera escuchado con más interés que el demostrado hasta ahora. Por fin, preguntó:

—¿Quieres decir que el Príncipe se ha olvidado ya de Charlotte?

La señora Assingham dio media vuelta sobre sí misma como impulsada por un resorte y dijo:

—Quería olvidarse de ella, por cuanto, naturalmente, era lo mejor que podía hacer.

Realmente parecía que la señora Assingham conocía a la perfección el caso. Ahora, ya no había cabos sueltos. Añadió:

—Era capaz de hacer este esfuerzo, siguió la senda que decía. También debes recordar la impresión que Maggie nos causó.

—Es una muchacha muy simpática, pero siempre me ha causado la impresión, sobre todo, de ser la clásica señorita con rentas de un millón al año. Si has querido decir que ésta fue también la impresión que causó al Príncipe, has arrojado mucha luz sobre el caso. Sí, porque te puedo asegurar que el esfuerzo para olvidar a Charlotte no pudo ser excesivo.

Estas palabras inquietaron a la señora Assingham, aunque sólo durante un instante:

—Jamás he dicho que al principio no lo fuera y jamás he dicho que, con el paso del tiempo, a él no le guste más el dinero de Maggie.

Bob Assingham replicó:

Y jamás he dicho que a mí no me guste.

Fumó en silencio durante un rato y preguntó:

—¿Hasta qué punto estaba enterada Maggie de la situación?

—¿Hasta qué punto? ¿Cuánto sabía de la historia?

La señora Assingham pareció considerar —como si se tratara de cuartillo y galones— la mejor manera de expresar aquel cuantitativo «cuánto». Dijo:

—Sabía cuanto Charlotte le había dicho en Florencia.

—¿Y qué le había dicho Charlotte?

—Muy poco.

—¿Cómo lo sabes?

—Porque no podía.

La señora Assingham explicó a continuación el significado de estas palabras:

—Hay ciertas cosas, querido, que nadie puede decir a Maggie, y me sorprende que, a pesar de lo espeso que eres, no te hayas dado cuenta. Incluso ahora te doy mi palabra de que no me gustaría nada decir ciertas cosas a Maggie.

El coronel fumó en silencio y dijo:

—¿Tanto se escandalizaría?

—Se atemorizaría. A su manera extraña e infantil, se sentiría profundamente herida. No ha nacido para saber lo que es el mal. Y es preciso que jamás llegue a saberlo.

Bob Assingham soltó una extraña y lúgubre carcajada, cuyo sonido tuvo la virtud de dejar paralizada a su esposa, y dijo:

—Pues hemos emprendido buen camino, a este fin.

Erguida, protestó:

—No hemos emprendido camino alguno. Los caminos están ya todos emprendidos; se emprendieron en el instante en que el Príncipe se acercó a nuestro coche aquel día en Villa Borghese, el segundo o tercer día de la estancia de Maggie en Roma, día en que, como recordarás, fuiste a no sé dónde con el señor Verver, y el Príncipe subió a nuestro coche y vino a tomar el té con nosotras a casa. Se habían conocido, se habían visto a conciencia el uno al otro, estaban en relación, todo lo demás llegaría por sí mismo, según las posibilidades que se ofrecieran. Prácticamente, y lo recuerdo bien, todo comenzó durante el viaje en coche. Maggie se enteró, gracias al saludo que un hombre dirigió al Príncipe, al cordial estilo romano, desde una esquina junto a la que pasábamos, de que uno de los nombres de pila del Príncipe, el nombre que siempre emplean sus parientes, es Americo, cuyo nombre, como probablemente ignoras, a pesar de llevar media vida viviendo conmigo, era, hace cuatrocientos años, o los que sean, el del audaz individuo que siguió a través de los mares la ruta de Colón y consiguió lo que no consiguió éste: ser el padrino o el padre nominal del nuevo continente, de modo y manera que todo lo que esté relacionado con él tiene, incluso ahora, la virtud de conmover nuestros despiadados pechos americanos.

El coronel, con su siniestra placidez, siempre daba adecuada respuesta a las no infrecuentes imputaciones de ignorancia que le lanzaba su esposa en lo tocante a su tierra natal, imputaciones que le dejaban impertérrito y en modo alguno avergonzado. Ni siquiera intentó iluminar las simas de su ignorancia, haciéndole ahora una pregunta a la que consiguió dar tono de curiosidad, sin insinuar siquiera el de disculpa:

—¿Y dónde está la relación a que te has referido?

Rápida, la señora Assingham contestó:

—En las mujeres. Mejor dicho, en una mujer de los viejos tiempos, a la que debemos estar agradecidos, que era descendiente del pretendido descubridor, del audaz individuo antes citado, a la que el Príncipe puede afortunadamente llamar antepasada. Una rama de esa otra familia había llegado a ser importante, lo suficientemente importante, por lo menos, para emparentar mediante matrimonio con la familia del Príncipe, y el nombre del navegante, coronado de gloria, llegó, como es natural, a ser tan apreciado entre los antepasados del Príncipe que siempre lo imponían a alguno de sus hijos, generación tras generación. De todas maneras, lo que quería decirte es que el hecho de llevar este nombre ayudó mucho al Príncipe, desde el principio, a ganarse las simpatías de los Verver, tal como recuerdo muy bien. Esta relación con el navegante causó una impresión muy romántica a Maggie, desde el instante en que lo supo. En un abrir y cerrar de ojos, Maggie colocó todos los eslabones que pudieran parecer ausentes, en la cadena sucesoria. Y yo me dije para mi capote: «Con este signo vencerás», máxime si se tenía en cuenta que el Príncipe, afortunadamente para él, reunía también los demás signos precisos. Realmente, dicha relación era prácticamente la parte afilada de la cuña…

Y la señora Assingham concluyó:

—Lo que me pareció una nota de adorable candor, por parte de los Verver.

El coronel aceptó sin reparos la historia, pero su comentario fue prosaico:

—Sabía muy bien lo que hacía el tal Americo. Y no me refiero al de pasados tiempos.

Valerosamente, la señora Assingham le espetó las siguientes palabras:

—¡No hace falta que insistas!

Pero el coronel remachó:

—El viejo Americo no es el único descubridor de la familia.

—Puedes decir lo que te dé la gana, pero la verdad es que, si bien es cierto que el viejo Americo descubrió América, o consiguió que le honraran como si la hubiera descubierto, también lo es que sus sucesores, con el paso del tiempo, descubrirían a los norteamericanos. Y concretamente uno de ellos descubriría lo muy patriotas que somos.

El coronel preguntó:

—¿Y este último no será acaso la misma persona que descubrió la relación antes mencionada?

La señora Assingham le miró de través:

—La relación es histórica, totalmente histórica. Tus insinuaciones sólo revelan tu cinismo. ¿No comprendes que la historia de esta familia es perfectamente conocida, desde las raíces hasta la última rama,

en todos los momentos de su desarrollo?

Bob Assingham dijo:

—Bueno, bueno…

Su esposa le recomendó intencionadamente:

—Un día ve al Museo Británico.

—Y cuando esté allí, ¿qué hago?

—Hay toda una inmensa sala, o departamento, o sección, o lo que sea, llena a rebosar de libros que únicamente tratan de su familia. Ve y lo verás.

—¿Lo has visto tú?

La señora Assingham dudó, aunque sólo un instante, y contestó:

—Pues, sí. Un día fui allí con Maggie. Echamos una ojeada a la familia del Príncipe, valga la expresión. Y nos trataron con mucha amabilidad.

Y, después de decir estas palabras, la señora Assingham volvió a seguir el hilo de la narración que su marido había conseguido alterar un poco:

—El efecto ya se había producido y en Roma el encantamiento comenzó a dar resultados a partir del momento en que el Príncipe viajó en coche con nosotras. Después, lo único que tuve que hacer fue sacarle a la situación el mejor partido.

Después de una breve pausa, la señora Assingham se apresuró a añadir:

—Quiero decir que el momento era propicio y en manera alguna consideré que mi deber fuera empeorarlo. Si volviera a darse aquella situación, no me comportaría de manera diferente. Me ocupé del caso según lo entendía en aquel entonces, que es de la misma manera en que sigo entendiéndolo en la actualidad. Me gustaba, me parecía una relación entre dos personas de la que sólo cabía esperar beneficios para todos.

No sin cierta intensidad, la señora Assingham añadió:

—Y nada ni nadie me hará pensar de manera diferente, ni siquiera ahora.

El coronel, quieto, sentado, levantada la pipa, observó:

—Tienes el precioso don de pensar siempre lo que más te conviene. Y también tienes la virtud de llegar a conclusiones opuestas, a más no poder, en cuestión de segundos.

Después de una pausa, prosiguió:

—Lo que en aquel entonces ocurrió fue que te enamoraste furiosamente del Príncipe y, como sea que no podías librarte de mí, tuviste que dar a tus impulsos un curso indirecto. Al igual que Charlotte, no podías casarte con él, pero podías casarle con otra persona, quedando siempre presentes dos elementos: el Príncipe y la institución matrimonial. Podías casarle con tu joven amiga, en la que no concurrían impedimentos.

—No sólo no había impedimentos sino que se daban buenas razones, razones positivas, excelentes, encantadoras.

Había hablado sin negar de ninguna manera los motivos de su actitud revelados por el coronel. Y tal abstención, clara y consciente, no le había costado el menor esfuerzo. La señora Assingham siguió:

—Sí, se trataba siempre del Príncipe y se trataba siempre de matrimonio, a Dios gracias. Y quiera Dios que siempre se trate de eso. Hace un año, el que yo pudiera ser una ayuda en este caso me hizo feliz y ahora sigue haciéndome feliz.

—En ese caso, ¿por qué no estás tranquila?

Fanny Assingham repuso:

—Estoy tranquila.

El coronel la miró con su palidez candorosa sin moverse del asiento. Ella volvió a moverse, como si quisiera reforzar con su inquietud su declaración de tranquilidad. Al principio, el coronel guardó silencio, como si hubiera aceptado la respuesta de su mujer, pero no tardó en romperlo:

—¿Y cómo interpretas el que, según tus propias explicaciones, Charlotte nada pudiera decir a Maggie? ¿Y cómo interpretas que el Príncipe nada le dijera? Y conste que comprendo que a Maggie no se le pueden decir ciertas cosas, debido a que, como tú dices, se asusta y se escandaliza muy fácilmente.

El coronel hizo estas objeciones muy despacio, y sus pausas permitían a su esposa ir de un lado para otro y atenderle. Pero seguía paseando, inquieta, cuando el coronel terminó su pregunta:

—Si no ocurrió nada que no hubiera debido ocurrir entre esta pareja, antes de que Charlotte huyera, lo que hizo, según dices, precisamente para que no ocurriera, ¿a santo de qué era tan terrible hablar de ello?

Después de escuchar esta pregunta, la señora Assingham siguió paseando y cuando por fin se detuvo ni

siquiera la contestó:

—Pensaba que querías que estuviera tranquila.

—Y es lo que quiero. Y procuro tranquilizarte todavía más, a fin de que no vuelvas a inquietarte. ¿Puedes estar tranquila, en lo tocante al punto a que me he referido?

Pensó unos instantes y, a juzgar por su contestación, se esforzó en estar tranquila:

—Estoy perfectamente segura de que Charlotte no desea, en manera alguna, creer que tuvo que huir por las razones a que nos estamos refiriendo, aunque el hecho de huir produjo el resultado que ella quería.

—¡Claro, si es que ha producido el resultado que ella quería!

Pero las palabras del coronel quedaban pendientes, en su significado, por aquel «si», que su esposa prefirió no tener en cuenta. Sin embargo, todavía quedó más pendiente, a causa de las siguientes palabras del coronel:

—En este caso, lo único que me pregunto es por qué Charlotte ha vuelto al lado del Príncipe.

—No ha vuelto al lado del Príncipe. En realidad, no ha vuelto por él.

—Soy capaz de decir todo lo que tú desees que diga, pero esto no me dejará tan satisfecho como si fueras tú quien lo dijera. La señora Assingham replicó:

—Nada puede dejarte satisfecho, querido. Nada te interesa, lo único que te interesa es divertirte groseramente, al ver que soy incapaz de lavarme las manos de todo.

—Imaginaba que tu tesis era que todo se ha desarrollado de una manera tan correcta que, precisamente por ello, podías lavarte las manos de este asunto.

Pero la señora Assingham demostró, como a menudo demostraba, que podía seguir en sus trece, haciendo caso omiso de las argumentaciones del coronel:

—Eres un ser dominado totalmente por la indiferencia, en realidad eres perfectamente inmoral. Has participado en el saqueo de ciudades, y estoy convencida de que has cometido hechos horrorosos. Pero puedes tener la seguridad de que no me dedico a torturarme a mí misma pensándolo. Riendo, concluyó:

—En consecuencia, lo único que digo es: «Bueno, ¿y qué?».

El coronel aceptó la hilaridad de su esposa, pero no cedió terreno:

—De todas maneras, estoy dispuesto a ayudar a la pobre Charlotte.

—¿A ayudarla, dices?

—Sí, a ayudarla a saber lo que quiere.

—Yo también. Pero Charlotte sabe muy bien lo que quiere.

Por fin, la señora Assingham reconoció este mérito de la muchacha, a modo de fruta madura de sus últimas meditaciones y paseos por la estancia. En el curso de la conversación, había buscado a tientas el hilo que la había llevado a esta conclusión y ahora lo había encontrado:

—Charlotte quiere ser magnífica.

Casi cínicamente, el coronel observó:

—Y lo es.

Ahora, ya muy segura, la señora Assingham dijo:

—Quiere ser absolutamente superior y es capaz.

—¿De quererlo?

—De convertir su deseo en realidad.

—¿Y cuál es su deseo?

—Hacer lo preciso para que Maggie supere sus dificultades.

Bob Assingham preguntó muy intrigado:

—¿Qué dificultades?

—Todas. Charlotte conoce bien al Príncipe. Y Maggie no le conoce.

Como si a su pesar tuviera que reconocerlo, la señora Assingham concluyó:

—No, pobrecilla, no le conoce.

—¿De lo cual resulta que Charlotte ha venido para darle lecciones?

Sin hacer caso de la pregunta, Fanny Assingham siguió desarrollando su pensamiento:

—Charlotte ha hecho algo muy grande en beneficio del Príncipe. Sí, hace aproximadamente un año, lo hizo. En realidad ayudó al Príncipe a hacer una cosa muy grande y me ayudó también a mí. Se puso al margen, se fue, le dejó en libertad. ¿Y qué era el silencio que Charlotte observó ante Maggie sino una ayuda al Príncipe? Si Charlotte hubiera hablado en Florencia, si Charlotte hubiera contado su triste historia, si hubiera regresado en cualquier otro instante en vez de hacerlo ahora, si no se hubiera ido a Nueva York y

se hubiera quedado allí, si no hubiera hecho todo esto, lo que ha ocurrido sería diferente. Por lo tanto, Charlotte se encuentra ahora en una posición que le permite ser consecuente.

Hizo una pausa y repitió con el mismo acento con que antes lo había dicho:

—Conoce al Príncipe y la pobrecilla Maggie, no.

La señora Assingham se había elevado, se sentía lúcida, se sentía casi inspirada. Pero, precisamente por esto, la profundidad de sus palabras avivó el superficial sentido común de su marido, quien dijo:

—En otras palabras, ¿Maggie se encuentra en peligro debido a su ignorancia? En cuyo caso, si Maggie se encuentra en peligro, hay peligro.

—No lo habrá, gracias a la comprensión de Charlotte. De ahí deriva la ocasión que Charlotte tiene de ser heroica, de ser sublime…

La buena señora, en estos instantes, estaba verdaderamente radiante. Siguió:

—Lo es, lo será. Y lo sabe. Y se convertirá en un elemento de positiva seguridad para su mejor amiga.

Bob Assingham le dirigió una dura mirada:

—¿Quién es esa «mejor amiga» a la que te refieres?

—¡A ver si lo descubres!

La señora Assingham había abrazado la gran verdad, la puso de relieve con estas palabras y ahora dijo:

—Y nosotros debemos ser sus mejores amigos.

—¿Amigos de quién?

—Tú y yo. Tú y yo debemos ser los mejores amigos de Charlotte. Nosotros debemos ayudarla.

—¿En su sublimidad?

—En su noble y solitaria vida. Aunque esta vida, y esto es esencial, no debe ser solitaria. Si se casa, no habrá problemas.

—En ese caso, ¿tenemos que casarla?

El silencio con que la señora Assingham contestó a estas palabras avivó todavía más la curiosidad de su marido, quien preguntó:

—Si todo es perfecto, ¿qué es lo que se puede compensar?

—Si por casualidad he causado un perjuicio a cualquiera de ellos, si cometí un error, este perjuicio, este error…

—¿Lo compensarás con otro error u otro perjuicio?

Como sea que su esposa tardaba en contestar, el coronel observó:

—Yo pensaba que tu tesis era que te sientes absolutamente segura.

—Nadie puede estar totalmente seguro de nada. Siempre hay posibilidades.

—En este caso, si tenemos que actuar a ciegas, ¿a santo de qué intervenir? Estas palabras la obligaron a mirarle fijamente. La señora Assingham dijo:

—¿Y dónde estarías tú, querido, si yo no hubiera intervenido contigo? El coronel repuso:

—Aquello no fue una intervención. Yo era ya tuyo. Yo fui tuyo desde el momento en que no me resistí a intervenir.

—Pues ésos tampoco se resistirán. También son míos, en el sentido de que les tengo un cariño inmenso. Y también en el sentido de que, a mi juicio, su cariño hacia mí no es mucho menor. Nuestra relación existe, es una realidad, y una realidad excelente. Estamos unidos, valga la expresión, y ahora ya es tarde para alterar este hecho. Tenemos que vivir en esta realidad y de acuerdo con esta realidad. En consecuencia, hacer lo preciso para que Charlotte consiga un buen marido, lo antes posible, será, tal como he dicho, algo vital para mí.

Con convicción, añadió:

—Esto lo encubrirá todo, lo abarcará todo.

Ya continuación, como su convicción parecía continuar de forma incongruente, dijo:

—Y al decir esto, me refiero al posible nerviosismo que quizá algún día me afecte. En realidad éste será mi deber, y no descansaré hasta haberlo cumplido.

En estos momentos, la señora Assingham se hallaba en un estado muy parecido al de la exaltación. Anunció:

—Y durante uno o dos años, estaré dispuesta a dar mi vida por conseguirlo, si es necesario. Entonces habré hecho todo lo que puedo.

El coronel interpretó estas palabras sin darles un sentido torcido:

—¿Quieres decir que, a tu juicio, nada es imposible para ti?

—No he dicho eso, ni nada que se le parezca. Digo que hay posibilidades, posibilidades más que suficientes para alentar esperanzas. ¿Cómo no puede haber esperanzas cuando una chica es como Charlotte?

—Y entre las cualidades de Charlotte ¿incluyes la de estar enamorada del Príncipe?

El coronel había formulado esta pregunta con una serenidad que pretendía ser de efectos fatales. Pero la señora Assingham no se inmutó:

—No está tan enamorada como para no querer casarse con otro. En la actualidad, le gustaría casarse.

—¿Te lo ha dicho?

—Todavía no. Es pronto aún. Pero querrá. Por el momento, no necesito que me diga nada. Su matrimonio demostrará la verdad.

—¿Qué verdad?

—La verdad de todo lo que he dicho.

—¿Ya quién demostrará la verdad?

—A mí, para empezar. Esto me bastará para trabajar en beneficio de Charlotte.

Y añadió:

—Y ello demostrará que Charlotte está curada, que acepta la situación.

El coronel rindió tributo a estas palabras mediante una larga chupada a su pipa y dijo:

—¿La situación consiste en hacer la única cosa que puede hacer que realmente parezca adecuada como una buena tapadera?

La señora Assingham miró a aquel seco buen hombre, como si ahora sólo fuera vulgar, y dijo:

—Es la única cosa que puede hacer que realmente signifique el inicio de una nueva vida. La única cosa que, más que cualquier otra, es prudente y sabia. La única cosa que le dará la oportunidad de ser magnífica.

El coronel soltó humo lentamente:

—¿Y, al mismo tiempo, la cosa que te dará la oportunidad de ser magnífica con ella?

—Seré todo lo magnífica que pueda, por lo menos. Bob Assingham se levantó:

—¿Y tú, precisamente tú, me llamas inmoral? Dudó antes de contestar:

—Si lo prefieres, te llamaré estúpido. Pero, como muy bien sabes, cuando la estupidez llega a cierto punto es inmoralidad, y de la misma manera, ¿qué es la moralidad sino una gran inteligencia?

El coronel se sintió incapaz de contestar a esta pregunta, lo que le permitió concluir en tono más firme aún:

—Además, en el peor de los casos, la cosa resulta divertida. Ah, bueno… Si hubieras empezado por ahí…

Las palabras del coronel implicaban que, en este caso, su esposa y él se encontraban en el mismo terreno. Pero ni siquiera así consiguió el asenso de ella, quien dijo:

—No me refiero a lo que tú entiendes por diversión. Buenas noches.

En respuesta a estas palabras, el coronel, mientras apagaba la luz eléctrica, emitió un extraño y corto gemido que fue casi un gruñido. Al parecer, sus palabras habían significado cierta particular clase de diversión.

Capítulo V

Cuando estuvieron en el parque Charlotte dijo de forma que daba un poco de miedo:

—Bueno, ahora debo decírselo, porque quiero ser absolutamente sincera. No quiero fingir y no puedo fingir ni un instante más. Puede usted pensar de mí lo que quiera, porque igual me da. Sabía que me daría igual y ahora veo que es verdad. He venido para esto. Y para nada más.

Al ver que el tono de sus palabras había dejado intrigado al Príncipe, Charlotte repitió:

—Para esto.

—¿Para «esto»?

El Príncipe contestó como si el particular objeto al que Charlotte se había referido fuera muy vago para él, o bien, como si se tratara de algo que no podía ser gran cosa.

Sin embargo, aquello tendría toda la importancia que ella pudiera darle, y dijo:

—Para pasar una hora a solas con usted.

Durante la noche anterior había llovido copiosamente y, aunque ahora el suelo estaba seco, gracias a una brisa purificadora, aquella mañana del mes de agosto era fresca y gris con unas nubes densas y de lento discurso encapotándola, y con un aire ligero. Los verdes del parque habían adquirido profundidad, y subía un saludable olor a tierra húmeda que había eliminado del lugar el polvo y los olores no tan agradables. Desde el momento en que entraron, Charlotte había mirado a su alrededor como queriendo dirigir un profundo saludo al lugar, un saludo, al mismo tiempo, de general reconocimiento. Incluso en el centro de Londres aquel día era de unas características muy inglesas, con cielo bajo, día lavado por la lluvia, día intenso. Parecía que aquel día hubiera estado esperando la llegada de la joven, como si ésta fuera amiga del día, supiera situarlo, supiera amarlo, como si el día formara parte de aquello por lo que había venido. Esta impresión difícilmente podía captarla un simple italiano de vagas percepciones, por cuanto se trataba de una de esas impresiones que para recibirlas era preciso gozar de la bendición de ser norteamericano, de la misma forma que era preciso gozar de la bendición de ser norteamericano para muchísimas otras cosas más, siempre y cuando uno no tuviera que quedarse en Norteamérica, tanto si ello era una bendición como si no lo era. De acuerdo con la cita concertada, a las diez y media el Príncipe había ido a buscar a la invitada de la señora Assingham a Cadogan Place; después de demorarse allí un poco, los dos habían avanzado a pie por Sloane Street, penetrando directamente en el parque por Knightsbridge. Habían llegado a este acuerdo un par de días antes, como consecuencia de la petición que la muchacha había hecho, en los primeros instantes, en la sala de la señora Assingham. Fue una petición que el transcurso de aquel par de días en modo alguno invalidó, sino que, al contrario, la situó en tal perspectiva que hubiera sido absurdo que alguien formulara objeciones. En realidad, ¿quién podía formular objeciones, cuando la señora Assingham, informada y sin haberse mostrado aparentemente contraria a ello, no había intervenido? Esto era lo que el joven Príncipe se había preguntado, teniendo muy en cuenta cuáles eran las actitudes que podían ponerle en ridículo. Tenía la certeza de que no iba a comenzar por dar muestras de miedo. Además, incluso en el caso de que al principio hubiera sentido notable miedo, ese miedo habría disminuido, y no poco, en el momento de la cita. El efecto de aquel corto lapso había sido, a su juicio, feliz y propiciatorio.

Aquellos dos días quedaron en gran medida ocupados por las audiencias que el Príncipe había dado a los invitados a su boda y por la dedicación, no menos absorbente, de Maggie en atender a su amiga, con la que

había estado hablando durante horas y horas en Portland Place, puesto que no la había invitado para dejarla sola, sino que había estado presente juntamente con otras personas y el contingente del Príncipe en el almuerzo, en el té, en la cena y en los continuos refrigerios —el Príncipe pensó que en su vida había tenido que dar cuenta de tanta comida—, que se ofrecían en cualquier momento que el Príncipe llegara. Y si bien era cierto que hasta ese momento no había vuelto a ver a solas a Charlotte, tampoco podía negarse que ni siquiera a Maggie la había visto a solas. En consecuencia, si no había visto a Maggie, nada más natural que tampoco hubiera podido ver a Charlotte. El excepcional instante, un brevísimo paréntesis en el tiempo, en los peldaños de la gran escalinata de Portland Place, había bastado para que la muchacha recordara al Príncipe —tan predispuesto suponía Charlotte que estaba éste— lo que debía hacer. Poco tiempo les quedaba para hacerlo. Todos habían traído regalos; los familiares del Príncipe le habían regalado maravillas, ¿cómo era posible que todavía tuvieran aquellos tesoros, que todavía pudieran encontrarlos? Charlotte nada había traído y estaba avergonzada, y ni siquiera la visión de los restantes regalos bastó para desanimar a Charlotte. Haría lo que pudiera, y el Príncipe se dijo que sin que Maggie se enterara, ayudaría a Charlotte a escoger el obsequio. Él había prolongado aquel breve instante con el fin de tener tiempo para dudar sobre cómo decírselo, y luego para arriesgarse a decírselo. El riesgo radicaba en que el Príncipe podía ofenderla, ofenderla en su orgullo, caso de que ella tuviera aquella clase de orgullo; pero también podía ofenderla de otras maneras. Charlotte no tenía aquella clase de orgullo. En consecuencia, la leve resistencia del Príncipe, mientras estaban allí apartados, no había representado grandes dificultades para él, ni vencerla había sido imposible.

El Príncipe había dicho:

—No me gusta inducirla a gastar dinero, y menos aún con semejante fin.

Charlotte, uno de dos peldaños más abajo que el Príncipe, mientras le miraba levantada la cara iluminada por la alta luz del techo abovedado del vestíbulo, frotaba con la palma de la mano la barnizada caoba de la baranda, montada sobre hierro bellamente forjado de estilo inglés del siglo XVIII.

—¿Debido a que piensa que tengo muy poco? Tengo el suficiente, por lo menos el dinero suficiente para gastarlo en una hora.

Sonriendo, añadió:

—Y tener el dinero suficiente para esto es lo mismo que tener una gran fortuna. Además, no se trata de comprar algo caro, ya que, a fin de cuentas, a Maggie le sobran los tesoros. No es cuestión de competir o de destacar sobre los demás. En cuestión de objetos de valor inapreciable, ¿qué es lo que Maggie no tiene? Mi regalo debe ser la ofrenda del pobre, algo precisamente que un rico no pueda darle, y algo que, siendo Maggie excesivamente rica para poder comprarlo, jamás pueda llegar a tener.

Había hablado como si hubiera pensado mucho en aquello. Añadió:

—Ahora bien, como no puede ser hermoso, ha de ser divertido. Y esto es lo que tenemos que buscar. Además, buscar en Londres es de por sí interesante.

Incluso ahora, el Príncipe recordaba que la palabra le había dejado intrigado:

—¿Divertido?

—Bueno, no quiero decir un juguete cómico, sino una cosa pequeña, dotada de encanto. Aunque absolutamente correcta, dentro de su baratura. A esto lo llamo divertido.

Charlotte también había añadido:

—En Roma, solía usted ayudarme a hacer compras baratas. Era usted un maestro en el arte de regatear. Conservo aún todas las cosas compradas en Roma, las pequeñas gangas conseguidas gracias a usted. En Londres, y en el mes de agosto, también hay gangas.

En el momento en que los dos daban un giro sobre sí mismos para subir juntos la escalinata, él sólo había osado objetar:

—Pero yo nada sé del modo de comprar de los ingleses y confieso que me parece aburrido. Desde luego, a mis pobres romanos los comprendo muy bien.

Riendo, la joven le contestó:

—Eran ellos quienes le comprendían a usted, y en esto radicaba el poder que usted ejercía sobre ellos. Aquí, lo divertido consiste en que ellos no nos comprenden. Podremos conseguir que sea divertido. Ya lo verá.

Si el Príncipe volvió a dudar, se debía a que sus palabras le daban motivo:

—Supongo que la diversión consistirá en encontrar el regalo.

—Exactamente. Esto es lo que he dicho.

—¿Y si no conseguimos que rebajen el precio?

—En este caso subiremos la oferta. Siempre hay soluciones. Además, Príncipe, ya que hablamos de esto, le diré que no soy pobre de solemnidad. —En tono ligero, poco acorde con su manera de ser, explicó—: Soy muy pobre para ciertas cosas, pero no soy pobre para otras. Volvió a detenerse en lo alto de la escalinata, y añadió:

—He estado ahorrando.

El Príncipe se mostró incrédulo:

—¿En Norteamérica?

—Sí, incluso allí he podido ahorrar con este fin.

Después de estas palabras concluyó:

—Y no podemos dejarlo para pasado mañana.

Esto fue, a fin de cuentas, con diez o doce palabras más, todo lo ocurrido. En todo momento, el Príncipe se había dado cuenta de que ofrecer resistencia, induciéndola con ello a suplicar, sólo hubiera servido para dar mayor importancia al asunto. El Príncipe podía enfrentarse con la situación tal como era, pero no debía hacer nada que le diera mayor importancia. Además, era triste obligar a Charlotte a suplicar. La estaba obligando a suplicar, y ella suplicaba, y él estaba dotado de una especial sensibilidad que no le permitía soportarlo. En consecuencia, todo lo anterior era la causa de lo que ahora pasaba y el Príncipe se había entregado, con todas sus fuerzas, a la política de no dar mayor importancia. Observó esta política incluso cuando ella indicó que lo importante era —en realidad, lo más importante— que Maggie no tuviera ni la más mínima idea de su leve aventura. Gran parte del interés, más de la mitad por lo menos, radicaba en que Maggie nada sospechara. En consecuencia, el Príncipe debía ocultarle a Maggie, tal como lo haría Charlotte, que habían salido los dos juntos o que se habían visto a solas siquiera cinco minutos. Era esencial, dicho sea en pocas palabras, mantener en absoluto secreto su pequeña excursión. Charlotte recurrió a la bondad del Príncipe para que la convenciera de que ella no traicionaba a Maggie. Francamente, algo desconcertante había habido en tal petición formulada en ese momento, es decir, en vísperas de las nupcias del Príncipe. Una cosa era haber coincidido por pura casualidad con la muchacha en casa de la señora Assingham, y otra quedar de acuerdo para pasar una mañana juntos, diríase en privado, igual que otras mañanas pasadas en Roma, prácticamente también en la intimidad. El Príncipe había informado a Maggie, aquella misma tarde, de los minutos pasados conversando con Charlotte, en Cadogan Place, pero sin mencionar los que la señora Assingham estuvo ausente, como tampoco hizo referencia a lo que su común amiga le había propuesto tan diligentemente en aquella ocasión. Pero lo que le había refrenado a dar su conformidad a la creación de un secreto, lo que le había inducido en lo alto de la escalinata a mostrarse remiso para que Charlotte se percatara, era la semejanza de este proyecto con otros del pasado, de los que estaba totalmente desvinculado y de los que deseaba seguir estándolo. Era como volver a empezar y esto era lo último que él deseaba. La fuerza y la belleza de su actual situación radicaban en que suponía comenzar de nuevo, es decir, que aquello que estaba empezando era original. Las percepciones de su conciencia se habían acumulado tan deprisa que, cuando Charlotte pudo leerlas en su cara, éste se hallaba ya al tanto de lo que comportaban. Charlotte, tan pronto se apercibió de ellas, se le enfrentó con un «¿Se atrevería usted a revelar lo que siente a Maggie?», que dio a tales sentimientos un carácter un tanto ridículo. Lo que al instante indujo al Príncipe a volver, una vez más, a adoptar la actitud de quitar importancia, quitar importancia a sus preocupaciones. Aquellos escrúpulos eran preocupaciones y, a la luz de esta verdad, el Príncipe decidió aplicar inmediatamente el feliz principio básico que solucionaría todos los problemas que se le presentaran.

Y este principio consistía simplemente en ser ante la muchacha siempre sencillo y comportarse con la máxima naturalidad. Esto lo solucionaría todo. Ya había solucionado un problema sometiéndose el Príncipe a la realidad que con más claridad veía. En verdad, la muchacha pedía poco en comparación con lo que daba. Lo que le daba ahora, al estar con él, conmovía al Príncipe, por cuanto significaba la total expresión de su renuncia. Realmente, Charlotte renunciaba, renunciaba a todo, sin ni siquiera insistir, en estos momentos, en lo mucho que aquello a lo que renunciaba había significado para ella. Su única petición era su insistencia en que mantuvieran en secreto su cita. Esto, a cambio de «todo», de todo aquello a lo que renunciaba, era una bagatela. En consecuencia, el Príncipe se dejó guiar por la muchacha. Tan rápidamente asentía, con su inteligente tolerancia, a cada giro, a cada observación que la muchacha hacía, que la impronta de las preferencias de la joven quedó claramente impresa en el encuentro, incluso mientras se hallaban en el parque. La muchacha quiso sentarse durante unos breves momentos, para averiguar cuál era

su situación real, y, obedeciendo a sus deseos, pararon unos diez minutos, distintos de los anteriores, sentados en un par de sillas de alquiler, por un penique, bajo la copa de un gran árbol. Para pasear habían penetrado en la zona cubierta de césped, recién cortado y refrescado por la lluvia, después de comprobar que ya estaba seco. Y las sillas, ausentes en el ancho camino, en el sendero principal y en la senda del parque, moteaban la amplia extensión de verde que, en cierta manera, parecía resaltar la libertad de la pareja. Esto ayudó a Charlotte a ver la posición en que se encontraba —su posición provincial— con más claridad todavía e impulsada por ello, de manera repentina y tan pronto vio la oportunidad, se sentó. Durante unos instantes, el Príncipe quedó en pie ante ella, como si quisiera subrayar la importancia que tenía el no perder tiempo, la misma importancia en la que ella había insistido anteriormente, pero tan pronto Charlotte hubo dicho unas cuantas palabras, el Príncipe se vio obligado a recurrir una vez más a su bondad. Mediante esta concesión él manifestó, de la única manera que ahora le era posible, que si por fin había aceptado la propuesta que le había formulado, por méritos de cuanto de «divertido» había en ella, aceptaría también todas las ideas de Charlotte que pudieran contribuir a tal efecto. Y, en consecuencia —y totalmente consecuente—, estaba dispuesto a considerar divertido que Charlotte reafirmara una y otra vez aquella verdad que era su verdad.

—Poco me importa el sentido que dé a mis palabras, y sólo le pido una cosa. Necesito decirlo, y esto es todo. Necesito no dejarlo en silencio. Verle una vez y estar en su compañía, como ahora estamos y como antes solíamos estar, aunque sea por una hora, o quizá dos, esto es lo que he querido durante semanas. Quiero decir, desde luego, hacerlo antes, antes de que haga usted lo que se dispone a hacer.

Fija la vista en el Príncipe, prosiguió:

—Durante todo este tiempo no he hecho más que preguntarme si lo conseguiría. Si no hubiera venido ahora, probablemente no hubiera venido, y quizá, seguro, no hubiera venido nunca. Ahora que estoy aquí, me quedaré, pero momentos hubo en que perdía todas las esperanzas. No me fue fácil, tenía dificultades, pero me encontraba en la disyuntiva de elegir entre esto o nada. Como puede ver, no luché en vano. Después… ¡No, no me interesaba!

Sonriendo, Charlotte añadió:

—Con ello no quiero decirle que no hubiera sido delicioso verle después, incluso en cualquier momento. Pero jamás hubiera venido después con este fin. Ahora es diferente. Esto es lo que yo quería. Esto es lo que he conseguido. Es lo que siempre tendré. Esto es lo que hubiera echado en falta, desde luego, en el caso de que usted hubiera hecho lo preciso para impedirlo. Si usted me hubiera considerado una mujer horrorosa, se habría negado a venir y, en este caso, yo me habría considerado inmensamente defraudada. Tenía que correr el riesgo. Me hubiera dicho: esto era lo que tendría que haber esperado. Yo no quería solamente pasar un rato con usted, sino que también quería que usted lo supiera. Quería que usted…

Dejó la frase inacabada, despacio, suavemente, con un leve temblor en la voz, aunque sin la más leve pérdida de sentido o secuencia y, a continuación, dijo con entereza:

—Quería que usted comprendiera. Es decir, quería que usted me escuchara. Creo que me da igual que lo comprenda o no. Si nada le pido, tampoco le puedo pedir esto. Lo que usted quiera pensar de mí carece de importancia. Lo que deseo es estar siempre con usted, de manera que jamás pueda desembarazarse totalmente de mí. Esto quería. Y no diré que usted quiera lo mismo. Puede dar a mis palabras la importancia que quiera, por poca que sea. Sólo digo que deseaba estar aquí con usted, donde ahora estamos y tal como estamos. Dicho en otras palabras, entregándome, plenamente dispuesta a hacerlo a cambio de nada. Eso es todo.

Dejó de hablar, como si hubiera terminado su exposición, aunque quieta y en silencio, como si en realidad quisiera que pasaran unos minutos a fin de que sus palabras fueran absorbidas por el aire que escuchaba, por el espacio que miraba, por la consciente hospitalidad de la naturaleza, a pesar de que la naturaleza se hallaba allí vulgarizada, formando parte de Londres, e incluso parecía que Charlotte quisiera que sus palabras penetraran antes en sus propios oídos que en la conciencia de su pasivo y prudente amigo. La atención de éste había llevado a cabo todo lo que la atención puede llevar a cabo. Su cara hermosa, levemente angustiada, aunque todavía más claramente «divertida», había cumplido suficientemente su función. Sin embargo, él se agarraba a aquello a lo que mejor podía agarrarse, es decir, al hecho de que la muchacha le dejaba en libertad, incluso en libertad de no contestar. Por esto, mientras el Príncipe le sonreía correspondiendo de esta manera a su información, sentía que sus labios seguían cerrados a las vaguedades de las respuestas y de las objeciones que surgían en su fuero interno. Por fin, Charlotte volvió a hablar:

—Quizá desee usted saber qué gano yo con esto. En tal caso, le diré que es asunto mío.

En realidad, el Príncipe no quería saber nada o, por lo menos, siguiendo el comportamiento más seguro, se comportaba como si no quisiera saberlo, lo cual prolongó la huidiza mudez en que se había refugiado. Se alegró cuando, habiendo expresado Charlotte lo que quería expresar a su satisfacción, dieron lo que bien podía pasar por final de aquel momento de la vida del Príncipe en que menos tuvo que decir. El movimiento y el hecho de hacer camino, juntamente con la conversación más impersonal, fue, naturalmente, un alivio, de manera que el Príncipe no volvió a sentirse en el apuro de tener que buscar las palabras justas y adecuadas. Parecía que la atmósfera se hubiera purificado. Ahora tenían que hablar de la gestión que se habían propuesto, de las oportunidades que a este efecto Londres ofrecía, de las características de esta maravillosa ciudad, de los placeres de vagar sin rumbo por ella, de tiendas, de posibilidades, de objetos concretos en que cada uno de ellos había reparado en anteriores ocasiones. Los dos quedaron sorprendidos por los muchos conocimientos que uno tenía del otro. El Príncipe quedó maravillado por lo muy bien que su amiga conocía Londres. Y también estaba orgulloso de sus propios conocimientos, hasta el punto de ser capaz de dar instrucciones a un cochero de coche de punto, como hacía a menudo. Esto era un capricho suyo, que formaba parte de su anglofilia, y era consecuente con este último rasgo que a fin de cuentas tenía más de apariencia que de profundidad. Cuando su compañera, recordando otras visitas y otros paseos, le habló de lugares que el Príncipe no conocía, de cosas que ignoraba, volvió a sentirse levemente humillado. Incluso hubiera podido sentir cierto enojo, de no haber sido porque en este punto su interés era más grande. Aquellos detalles arrojaban nueva luz sobre la persona de Charlotte, sobre sus curiosos conocimientos mundanos que en Roma ya había tenido ocasión de comprobar, pero que podía advertir más claramente en el escenario de la gran ciudad de Londres. En comparación con Londres, Roma era un pueblo, una fiesta familiar, una menuda espineta de los viejos tiempos que podía tocarse con los dedos de una sola mano. Cuando llegaron a Marble Arch, casi tuvo la impresión de que Charlotte le mostraba otro Londres, y esto le dio un nuevo y más sólido motivo a su diversión. El Príncipe no tenía ahora dificultad alguna en adoptar el tono adecuado para ponerse en sus manos. Si se las arreglaban para discutir un poco, con franqueza y lealtad, acerca de los sitios donde deberían ir para encontrar algunas oportunidades de valor, la situación podía quedar gloriosamente resuelta. Sin embargo, los dos estuvieron de acuerdo en lo referente a no ir a los lugares que Maggie pudiera conocer. Charlotte recordó, sin dar importancia a sus palabras, que en su momento había puesto como condición mantenerse alejados de todos los lugares que el Príncipe había visitado en compañía de Maggie.

Esta condición careció de importancia ya que, a pesar de que el Príncipe durante el mes anterior apenas había hecho otra cosa que acompañar a su futura esposa en sus compras, los *antiquarii*, como los llamaba cuando hablaba con Charlotte, no habían sido ni mucho menos principal objeto de sus visitas. A Maggie no le interesaban, salvo los de Bond Street. La actitud de Maggie sobre este punto era en gran medida el resultado de la de su padre. El señor Verver, uno de los más grandes coleccionistas mundiales, nunca había dejado vagar sola a su hija. El señor Verver tenía pocas relaciones con las tiendas, ya que casi siempre era comprador al que los vendedores se dirigían en privado y de manera indirecta. Personas importantes de todos los puntos de Europa buscaban el modo de ser presentadas a él. Personajes todos ellos de increíble altura, y muchos más de los que jamás se llegaría a saber, ya que en estos casos cuantos intervenían se comprometían solemnemente a guardar el secreto, acudían a él por considerarle uno de los hombres que formaban la corta y probada lista de aquéllos capaces de pagar el precio justo. En consecuencia, el Príncipe y Charlotte tuvieron pocas dificultades en mostrarse de acuerdo en que debían evitar las rutas seguidas por los Verver, padre e hija. Lo único importante de esta conversación radicó en que condujo por un momento a que hablaran por primera vez de Maggie. Cuando todavía se hallaban en el parque, Charlotte se refirió a los Verver —fue ella quien empezó—, con una serenidad tal en su enjuiciamiento que resultó extraña después de las palabras que había pronunciado diez minutos antes. Éste fue otro rasgo de Charlotte, otra luz sobre su persona, como habría dicho el Príncipe, que éste admiró, aunque sin demostrarlo en todo su valor, por la naturalidad del cambio efectuado por la muchacha, cambio cuyo motivo no fue preciso indagar ni explicar. La muchacha se había detenido y había dicho, bruscamente:

—Desde luego, es tan buena que cualquier cosa bastaría para dejarla contenta. Quiero decir que incluso podría regalarle cualquier cosa del bazar de Baker Street.

El Príncipe se había reído ante aquella alusión a su brevísima conversación en Portland Place, y había dicho:

—Esto es exactamente lo que quise decir. Es lo que recomendé.

Sin embargo, Charlotte hizo caso omiso de esta referencia y siguió el curso de sus pensamientos:

—Pero no hay que pensar en eso. Si pensáramos en eso jamás podríamos hacer nada en su beneficio.

Acto seguido, explicó:

—Quiero decir si nos aprovecháramos de su manera de ser.

—¿Su manera de ser?

Como si no le hubiese oído, la muchacha prosiguió:

—No, no se debe, y si no es por ella, al menos es por una misma. Evita el planteamiento de un problema de esta clase.

Charlotte había hablado como pensativa y fijando la vista en los ojos de su amigo; parecía que, preocupada y con sentido práctico, hubiera hablado de una persona con la que el Príncipe estuviera sólo levemente relacionado. Éste dijo:

—Desde luego, Maggie a nadie crea problemas.

Y, luego, como si estas palabras fueran ambiguas o insuficientes, añadió:

—Es una bendita de Dios que carece de egoísmo.

Al instante, Charlotte respondió:

—Esto es lo que quería decir. Carece de egoísmo. No hay nada, absolutamente nada, que una se sienta obligada a hacer en su beneficio. No encuentra a faltar nada, no desea nada. Quiero decir cuando una la quiere o, mejor dicho, cuando ella la quiere a una. Se olvida.

El Príncipe frunció un poco el entrecejo para rendir tributo a la seriedad, por lo menos, y preguntó:

—¿Qué es lo que olvida?

—Todo, cualquier cosa que una pudiera hacer por ella y no hace. Prescinde de todo salvo de su propia predisposición a tratar amablemente al prójimo. Sólo a sí misma se exige esfuerzos cuando tiene que exigírselos, que son pocas veces. Todo lo hace ella. Y esto es terrible.

El Príncipe la escuchó atentamente, aunque siempre circunspecto, ya que no quería comprometerse. Preguntó:

—¿Terrible?

—Sí, siempre y cuando una no sea casi tan buena como ella. Ofrece a los demás un trato excesivamente fácil. Y es preciso tener cierto temple, cuando hace referencia a la decencia y a la dignidad para aguantarla.

Después de una pausa, siguió en el mismo tono:

—Y no hay nadie que sea lo bastante decente, lo bastante bueno, para estar a la altura de semejante trato. Por lo menos, así es sin la ayuda de la religión o algo parecido. No, no se puede, sin oraciones ni ayunos, es decir, sin poner gran atención. Desde luego, gente como usted y como yo no podemos.

El Príncipe pensó un poco y dijo cortésmente:

—¿No somos lo bastante buenos para poder soportarlo?

—Bueno, quiero decir que no somos lo bastante buenos para soportarlo sin experimentar cierta tensión. Estimo que usted y yo pertenecemos a esa clase de personas que nos dejamos mimar fácilmente.

Una vez más por cortesía, el Príncipe siguió aquella conversación:

—No sé… ¿No cabe la posibilidad de que el afecto que uno siente por ella fortalezca más la decencia de uno, tal como usted la llama, de lo que su generosidad, su afecto, «su decencia» tiene la triste facultad de debilitar aquélla?

—Desde luego, ésta ha de ser la solución.

Pero, a pesar de todo, Charlotte había conseguido que lo que había dicho interesara a su acompañante, quien dijo:

—Comprendo lo que ha querido decir y creo que puede resumirse en la especial manera en que Maggie cree en uno. Cuando en él deposita su fe.

Charlotte Stant dijo:

—Sí, se resume en esto.

En tono casi protector, él preguntó:

—¿Y por qué razón ha de ser terrible?

—Porque siempre es terrible tener que apiadarse de alguien.

—No, cuando se ayuda a la persona de quien uno se apiada.

—¿Y si no hay manera de ayudarla?

—Siempre hay manera, siempre.

Después de decir estas palabras, el Príncipe añadió certeramente:

—Siempre y cuando la queramos. Y esto lo dábamos por supuesto.

En términos generales, Charlotte se mostró de acuerdo:
—Desde luego, y en este caso, todo se reduce a negarnos terminantemente a que nos mimen.
Riendo, mientras caminaban, él asintió:
—Claro… Todo, toda esa «decencia» de que usted ha hablado se reduce a eso.
Charlotte anduvo en silencio a su lado durante unos instantes después dijo:
—Esto es solamente lo que quería decir.

Capítulo VI

El hombre de la tiendecilla en la que, bastante tiempo después de haber sostenido la anterior conversación, recalaron los dos más tiempo, el menudo pero interesante comerciante de la calle Bloomsbury, cuyo rasgo principal era una insistencia discreta debido a que se trataba de una insistencia casi muda, pero al mismo tiempo con la singular característica de ser interesantemente coactiva, fijó en sus visitantes la mirada de un par de ojos extraordinarios, y su mirada anduvo saltando del uno al otro mientras la pareja examinaba el objeto con el que el vendedor tenía más esperanzas de tentarlos. Ésta era la última visita que efectuaban, debido a que el tiempo que se habían fijado estaba ya tocando a su fin. Había transcurrido por lo menos una hora desde que habían subido a un coche de alquiler en Marble Arch, hora que no había dado más resultado que el de la diversión al principio prevista. Naturalmente, la diversión debía consistir en buscar, pero también conllevaba la posibilidad de encontrar, la posibilidad que hubiera resultado enojosa, en el caso de hacerse realidad excesivamente pronto. Ahora, sin embargo, la cuestión consistía en saber si realmente encontraban en la tienda de Bloomsbury, mientras gozaban de la constante y absorta atención del hombrecillo. Evidentemente, aquel hombre era el dueño de la tienda, era también un hombre muy entregado a su negocio, cuya esencia, a su parecer, radicaba en el especial secreto que poseía para importunar tan poco al cliente que las relaciones con él adquirían una indudable solemnidad. Tenía pocos artículos; no se daba allí aquella superabundancia de «trastos» que habían visto en las restantes tiendas, y nuestros amigos tuvieron incluso la impresión al entrar de que las existencias eran tan escasas que, habida cuenta de que no cabía encontrar allí objetos valiosos, casi producirían una impresión lamentable. Luego, nuestros amigos cambiaron de parecer, porque si bien los objetos ante su vista eran pequeños, algunos de ellos sacados del escaparate y otros de una alacena situada detrás del mostrador —lugar oscuro, en la tienda de techo bajo, a pesar de las puertas de vidrio—, cada uno atrajo su atención, gracias a sus propios aunque modestos méritos, con lo que el dueño de la tienda no tardó en advertir que aquellos clientes le comprarían. Los objetos exhibidos eran heterogéneos y en modo alguno impresionantes, sin embargo se diferenciaban agradablemente de cuanto los visitantes habían visto hasta el momento en las anteriores tiendas.

Charlotte, después de esta visita, quedó embargada por muchas y muy diversas impresiones, algunas de las cuales comunicó a su compañero y amigo más tarde y siempre en interés de su diversión. Una de estas impresiones fue que el dueño de la tienda era lo más curioso entre todo lo que habían visto. El Príncipe contestaría diciendo que no se había fijado en dicho hombre, lo cual coincidía con lo que ella le había escuchado más de una vez, en pasado tiempo, hasta el punto de llegar a la convicción, que comunicó al Príncipe, de que éste no se percataba de nada que se encontrara por debajo de cierto nivel social. Para el Príncipe un tendero era igual a otro tendero, lo cual resultaba un tanto impropio en el caso de una mente como la suya que, cuando percibía, tanto percibía. Siempre daba por supuesta la mayor mezquindad en todos los individuos de esos niveles sociales y, en consecuencia, la noche de su mezquindad, o como se le quiera llamar, tenía la virtud para él de que todos los gatos fueran pardos. Indudablemente no quería ofenderlos, pero los imaginaba como si sus propios ojos sólo tuvieran visión en el nivel en que se encontraba su elevada cabeza. Contrariamente, la visión de Charlotte, y esto el Príncipe ya había tenido ocasión de comprobarlo, alcanzaba a todos los niveles. Se fijaba en los mendigos, se acordaba de los

criados, reconocía a los cocheros. A menudo, yendo acompañada del Príncipe, había descubierto belleza en niños sucios y había admitido «carácter» impreso en los rostros de los vendedores ambulantes. Ahora había encontrado interesante al anticuario, debido a que daba importancia a sus objetos y también, en parte, a que él les dio importancia a ellos dos. Charlotte diría: «Y no sólo se debe a que le gusta venderlos, ya que cabe la posibilidad de que no quiera desprenderse de ellos. Hasta tengo la impresión de que le gustaría conservarlos si pudiera. De todas maneras, prefiere venderlos a las personas que merecen tenerlos. Nosotros, evidentemente, pertenecemos a esa categoría. Este hombre conoce quién merece tener sus objetos y quién no, con sólo una ojeada. Y ésta es la razón por la que ha podido usted darse cuenta o, al menos yo me he dado cuenta, de que le hemos gustado». Con insistencia preguntaría Charlotte: «¿No se ha fijado en la manera en que nos miraba? Dudo mucho que alguien nos haya mirado jamás con tan buenos ojos». Como si hablara para sí, y con un convencimiento que casi parecía producirle inquietud, observó: «Sí, este hombre nos recordará». Luego, como si quisiera tranquilizarse, advirtió: «Y esto se debe a que este hombre, por su buen gusto, porque tiene buen gusto, se ha quedado agradablemente impresionado por nosotros, se ha formado sus ideas con respecto a nosotros. Bueno, pues la verdad, no me parece raro, al fin y al cabo somos hermosos y él se ha dado cuenta. Además, este hombre tiene su propio estilo, su peculiar manera de comportarse. Su normal manera de comportarse es ésa de no decir nada con los labios sin dejar de impresionar con la expresión de su cara, de una manera indicativa de que sabe que ejerce presión y sabe que el otro también lo sabe».

De oro viejo y plata vieja, de viejo bronce, hechos con artística artesanía de joyero, eran los objetos que fue sacando y que terminaron moteando completamente el mostrador, en que los delgados y ligeros dedos del vendedor, con pulidas y limpias uñas, los tocaban breve, nerviosa, tiernamente, de la misma forma que los dedos del jugador de ajedrez reposan durante breves instantes, sobre el tablero, encima de la pieza que considera debe mover, pero que quizá luego no mueva. Se trataba de antigüedades, ornamentos, pendientes, broches, hebillas, pretextos para la presencia de apagados brillantes, desangrados rubíes, perlas tan grandes o tan opacas que difícilmente podían tener valor; miniaturas con diamantes montados que habían dejado de deslumbrar, cajitas de rapé ofrecidas por personajes de dudosa grandeza, o a ellos ofrendadas, tazas, bandejas, platillos, que traían a la mente la idea de la casa de empeño, arcaicos y parduzcos, que conservados en buen estado hubieran sido valiosas antigüedades. Unas cuantas medallas conmemorativas, de bella línea y oscura leyenda, uno o dos monumentos clásicos, cosas de los primeros años del siglo, cosas napoleónicas, templos, obeliscos, arcos, reproducidos en miniatura, eran el remate de la indiscreta exposición en la que, ni siquiera después de añadir varias extrañas sortijas, camafeos, amatistas y carbúnculos, cada una de cuyas piezas había reposado en el viejo y fino satén que forraba una cajita de débil cierre, no se veía gran fuerza de persuasión, a pesar de la relativa proporción de una escasa poseía. Los visitantes miraban, tocaban, fingían ponderar vagamente, matizando su interés aun cuando con escepticismo en la medida que la cortesía se lo permitía. Era imposible que no sintieran tal escepticismo, después de haber acordado tácitamente que era absurdo ofrecer a Maggie un ejemplar de aquella exposición. Porque un regalo dotado de pretensiones sin ser «bueno» ni ser un tesoro podía suscitar el entusiasmo del dador, pero, al mismo tiempo, se le podría considerar como excesivamente simple como regalo desde cualquier punto de vista. El Príncipe y Charlotte llevaban más de dos horas juntos y nada habían encontrado todavía. Esto obligó a Charlotte a hacer una confesión:

—Realmente, creo que, en el caso de regalar una cosa así, el único valor que puede tener es el de haber pertenecido a quien lo regala. El Príncipe, no sin una nota de triunfo en la voz, repuso:

—*Ecco*, así es.

En la pared, a espaldas del comerciante, había varias alacenas pequeñas.

Charlotte había visto cómo el tendero abría dos o tres de ellas, por lo que, ahora, la vista de Charlotte se posaba en las que todavía seguían cerradas. Pero Charlotte redondeó su confesión:

—Aquí no hay nada que Maggie pueda llevar.

Después de unos instantes de silencio, el Príncipe preguntó:

—¿Y cree que hay algo que pueda llevar usted?

Estas palabras la sobresaltaron. Sin mirar los objetos y con la vista fija en él muy directamente repuso:

—No.

En voz baja, él exclamó:

—¡Ah!

Charlotte preguntó:

—¿Es que pretendía regalarme algo?

—Pues, ¿por qué no? Un pequeño *ricordo*.

—¿Un *ricordo* de qué?

—Bueno, de «esto», de lo que usted misma ha dicho, de esta pequeña búsqueda.

Ahora sonriente, ella replicó:

—Bueno, creo que, en todo momento, sólo he querido decirle que nada le pido, en consecuencia la idea del regalo me parece ilógica. Riendo, el Príncipe exclamó:

—¡Oh, Dios mío…!

Entretanto, el dueño de la tienda siguió con la vista fija en ellos, y la muchacha, a pesar de que en aquel momento estaba más interesada en la conversación con su amigo que en cualquier otra cosa, volvió a cruzar una mirada con el vendedor. Para Charlotte constituía un consuelo el que la lengua extranjera en la que el Príncipe y ella hablaban cubriera lo que decían, de manera que incluso parecía, ahora que el Príncipe sostenía una cajita de rapé en la mano, que estuvieran hablando de su posible compra. Dirigiéndose a su compañero, Charlotte observó:

—Para usted, el regalo que me haga a mí no significa nada. Por el contrario, un regalo hecho por mí a usted sí quiere decir algo.

El Príncipe había abierto la cajita de rapé, tenía la vista fija en ella. Dijo:

—¿Quiere usted decir que considera que puede…?

—¿Qué?

—¿Que puede ofrecerme algo?

Esto motivó que Charlotte guardara un largo silencio; cuando volvió a hablar, lo hizo de tal manera que parecía que hubiera podido dirigirse, en extraña reacción, al dueño de la tienda:

—¿Me permitiría usted…?

Dirigiéndose a la cajita de rapé, el Príncipe repuso:

—No.

—¿No aceptaría un regalo si yo se lo hiciera?

De la misma manera, volvió a contestar:

—No.

Charlotte respiró profundamente y, como con un reprimido suspiro, dijo:

—Resulta que ha sido usted quien ha expresado una idea que era mía. Esto es lo que quería hacer.

Luego, añadió:

—Lo que tenía esperanzas de poder hacer.

El Príncipe dejó la cajita de rapé en el mostrador, y desvió la vista sin hacer el menor caso de la atención que le prestaba el hombrecillo de la tienda. El Príncipe dijo:

—¿Por esta razón me pidió que la acompañara?

—Esto es asunto mío. ¿No me lo permite?

—No, *cara mia*.

—¿Es imposible?

—Es imposible.

Dichas estas palabras, el Príncipe cogió un broche. Charlotte volvió a guardar silencio, mientras el dueño de la tienda se limitaba a esperar.

Ella dijo:

—Si aceptara de usted uno de estos pequeños y encantadores objetos de adorno, tal como me propone, ¿qué tendría que hacer con él?

Por fin, el Príncipe se mostró un poco irritado e incluso dirigió una vaga mirada al dueño de la tienda, como si éste pudiera comprender el idioma en que los dos hablaban. El Príncipe dijo:

—¡Llevarlo, *per Bacco*!

—¿Dónde? ¿Debajo de la ropa?

—Donde usted quiera. Pero creo que estará usted de acuerdo en que no vale la pena seguir hablando de este tema.

Sonriendo, Charlotte observó:

—Sólo vale la pena seguir hablando de este tema, *mio caro*, debido a que ha sido usted quien lo ha iniciado. La pregunta que voy a hacerle me parece razonable, y sus deseos de hacerme un obsequio se mantendrán o no según la respuesta que usted mismo dé a mi pregunta. Si yo me pusiera uno de estos

objetos regalado por usted, ¿cree que podría mostrarlo a Maggie y decirle quién me lo ha regalado?

Entre ellos habían utilizado a menudo, con finalidad jocosamente descriptiva, el término «viejo romano». En otros tiempos, y de un modo un tanto burlón, éstas habían sido las palabras que el Príncipe se aplicaba a sí mismo para explicar cualquier actitud suya. Y, en realidad, nada pareció tan propio de un viejo romano como su encogimiento de hombros:

—¿Por qué no?

—Porque desde nuestro punto de vista, sería imposible explicar a Maggie el pretexto.

Desorientado, el Príncipe preguntó:

—¿El pretexto?

—La ocasión. Este paseo que hemos dado juntos y del que no debemos hablar.

Después de unos instantes de silencio, el Príncipe dijo:

—Ah, sí, es cierto, ahora recuerdo que no debemos hablar de esto.

—A ello se ha comprometido. Y, como puede ver, el regalo y el paseo van unidos. Así es que no insista.

Una vez más, el Príncipe dejó distraídamente el objeto que había sostenido en la mano y, volviéndose hacia Charlotte y concediéndole toda su atención, le dijo con acento de cansancio:

—No insisto.

Por el momento, la cuestión quedó zanjada, aun cuando puso de relieve que nada habían avanzado en su gestión. El dueño de la tienda, que había permanecido impertérrito, seguía allí, pacienzudo, lo cual, unido a su intensa mudez, casi producía el efecto de un irónico comentario a la conversación entre los dos. El Príncipe se dirigió hacia las puertas de vidrio del establecimiento dándoles la espalda a ellos dos, como si no tuviera nada más que hacer allí, y, con aire igualmente pacienzudo, se entregó a observar la calle. En ese momento, el dueño de la tienda, dirigiéndose a Charlotte, rompió espectacularmente el silencio, y dijo con triste acento:

—Ha visto, *disgraziatamente, signora principesa*, demasiadas cosas.

Estas palabras obligaron al Príncipe a dar media vuelta sobre sí mismo. El sobresalto no se debía al sentido de las palabras, sino a su sonido, que fue el del más castizo y sonoro italiano. Charlotte intercambió con su amigo una mirada pareja a la que éste le dirigió, y por unos instantes quedaron los dos paralizados. Pero la mirada de los dos había dicho más de una cosa. Los dos se habían alarmado al advertir que aquel pobre hombre había comprendido su íntima conversación, y también que había atribuido a Charlotte un título que no podía poseer, pero luego, para tranquilizarse mutuamente, se dijeron que el asunto carecía de toda importancia. El Príncipe siguió junto a la puerta y desde allí se dirigió al dueño de la tienda:

—Es usted italiano, ¿verdad?

El dueño de la tienda contestó en inglés:

—Oh, no, no.

—¿Es usted inglés?

En esta ocasión el dueño, sonriente, contestó en brevísimo italiano:

—*Che*!

El dueño de la tienda evitó la continuación de aquella conversación, prácticamente la zanjó de modo terminante al dirigirse hacia un pequeño armario del que, hasta el momento nada había sacado, cuya puerta abrió con la llave, y del que extrajo una caja cuadrada, de unas veinte pulgadas de altura, cubierta con desgastado cuero. Puso la caja sobre el mostrador, levantó un par de ganchos que la cerraban, levantó la tapa y de la caja sacó una especie de vasija para beber más grande que una taza normal, aun cuando no de exagerado tamaño, que parecía ser de fino oro viejo o de un material otrora intensamente dorado. El dueño de la tienda manejaba este objeto con ternura, con ceremonia, y lo depositó sobre una pequeña pieza de satén. Observó:

—Mi copa dorada.

Lo dijo como si con ello lo dijera todo. Dejó que el importante objeto, ya que importante parecía en los presentes momentos, produjera el efecto que sin la menor duda debía producir. Sencillo, aunque de singular elegancia, el objeto tenía un soporte circular, una especie de corto pedestal, cuya base se ensanchaba levemente y, aun cuando no destacaba por su solemnidad, merecía el título por el encanto de su forma, así como por el tono de su superficie. Habría podido ser un cáliz, cuya altura hubiera sido reducida a la mitad para dar más elegancia a su bella curvatura. Por parecer todo él de oro, resultaba impresionante, e incluso parecía suscitar la prudencia del admirador. Inmediatamente, Charlotte lo cogió con cuidado, mientras el Príncipe se movió un poco para contemplar el objeto, sin acercarse demasiado a él.

El objeto pesaba más de lo que Charlotte había imaginado. Preguntó al dueño de la tienda:

—¿Es oro realmente?

El dueño de la tienda dudó unos instantes y dijo:

—Examínelo un poco y quizá lo averigüe.

Charlotte lo miró, sosteniéndolo con las dos manos, y dándole una vuelta bajo la luz. Dijo:

—Quizá resulte barato, teniendo en cuenta su valor, pero mucho me temo que sea caro para mí.

El hombre observó:

—Puedo venderlo por menos de lo que vale. Lo conseguí por mucho menos.

—¿Por cuánto lo vende, entonces?

El dueño esperó una vez más, sin alterar su serena mirada, y dijo:

—¿Le gusta?

El Príncipe se acercó un poco más, la miró y le preguntó:

—*Cos è*?

—Bueno, *signori miel*, si desean saberlo, les diré que es un recipiente de cristal perfecto.

El Príncipe exclamó:

—¡*Per Dio*, claro que queremos saberlo!

Y acto seguido, dio media vuelta y regresó junto a las puertas de vidrio.

Charlotte dejó el objeto sobre el mostrador. Estaba interesada y preguntó al vendedor:

—¿Quiere decir que está tallado de un solo cristal?

—Si no es así, puedo prometerle que jamás descubrirá en él una pieza de unión o un punto en que una pieza haya sido pegada a otra.

—¿Incluso si quito el oro rascándolo?

El dueño de la tienda, siempre respetuoso, dio muestras de que sus palabras le habían divertido:

—No podrá quitarlo rascando, ya que el oro ha sido perfectamente aplicado, aunque no sé cómo ni dónde. Seguramente lo aplicó un viejo artesano muy competente, y mediante un hermoso procedimiento antiguo. Francamente prendada de la copa, sonrió al dueño de la tienda, preguntándole:

—¿Mediante un arte olvidado?

—Llamémosle un arte olvidado.

—Pero ¿de qué época es?

—Bueno, digamos también de una época olvidada.

La muchacha arguyó:

—Si tan precioso es este objeto, ¿cómo puede venderlo a precio barato?

Su interlocutor dejó pasar tiempo, una vez más, pero, en esta ocasión, el Príncipe perdió la paciencia. Dirigiéndose a Charlotte dijo:

—La espero fuera.

Y aunque habló sin irritarse, subrayó sus palabras saliendo inmediatamente a la calle, en donde, durante los minutos siguientes, Charlotte y el dueño de la tienda pudieron verle de espaldas, esperando filosóficamente y fumando un cigarrillo. Charlotte incluso le observó unos instantes, ya que tenía clara conciencia de la divertida afición italiana que su amigo tenía a observar la vida callejera londinense.

Entre tanto, el dueño de la tienda contestó a su pregunta:

—Lo he tenido mucho tiempo sin ofrecerlo en venta. Me parece que lo he conservado para ofrecérselo a usted, *madam*.

—¿Lo ha guardado para mí, debido a que pensaba que yo no vería la tara que este objeto tiene?

El dueño de la tienda siguió mirándola, como si siguiera observando el funcionamiento de su mente. Por fin, dijo:

—¿Qué tara tiene?

—No soy yo quien debe decirlo, sino usted. Desde luego, algo ha de tener.

—Pero si se trata de algo que no se puede descubrir, ¿acaso no es lo mismo que si nada tuviera?

—Seguramente lo descubriría tan pronto hubiera pagado el precio. Lúcidamente, el dueño de la tienda observó:

—No lo descubriría si el precio pagado no fuese excesivo.

—¿Y cuál es este precio que usted considera «módico»?

—¿Qué le parece quince libras?

Con gran rapidez, Charlotte repuso:

—Pues me parece muchísimo.

El dueño de la tienda meneó negativamente la cabeza, despacio pero con firmeza:

—Es mi precio, señora. Y si usted admira este objeto, realmente creo que debe adquirirlo. El precio no es excesivo. Es casi nada. No puedo rebajarlo. Charlotte, dubitativa, pero resistiéndose, se inclinó sobre el objeto: —Imposible, es más de lo que puedo permitirme.

—Bueno, uno puede permitirse gastar más para un regalo de lo que uno puede permitirse gastar para uno mismo.

El vendedor había dicho estas palabras tan dulcemente que Charlotte se dejó ganar por ellas, y en vez de poner al dueño de la tienda en el sitio que le correspondía, cual suele decirse, observó:

—Desde luego, se trata de un regalo.

—Sería un bello regalo.

Charlotte observó:

—¿Usted cree que se puede regalar un objeto que nos consta tiene una tara?

Sonriendo, el hombrecillo dijo:

—Bueno, si uno sabe que el objeto tiene una tara, le basta con decirlo. Con ello la buena fe queda a salvo.

—¿Y se deja que la persona que recibe el regalo se encargue de descubrir en qué consiste la tara?

—No se dedicará a descubrir la tara si se trata de un verdadero caballero.

—No me refiero concretamente a nadie.

—Bueno, pues trátese de quien se trate, si sabe que el objeto tiene una tara, quizá intente descubrir en qué consiste. Pero no lo logrará.

Charlotte miró fijamente al vendedor, como si, a pesar de sentirse insatisfecha y desorientada, siguiera prendada de aquel objeto.

Dijo:

—¿No lo logrará ni siquiera en el caso de que el objeto se rompa y quede hecho añicos?

Al advertir que el dueño de la tienda guardaba silencio, Charlotte insistió:

—¿Ni siquiera en el caso de que el hombre a quien regale esto me diga, «La copa dorada se ha roto»?

El dueño de la tienda siguió guardando silencio. Por fin dijo:

—¡Bueno, si alguien se propone romperla…!

Charlotte se echó a reír, admirando casi la expresión de la cara del hombrecillo, y dijo:

—¿Quiere decir que hay que golpearla con un martillo?

—Sí, siempre y cuando otro objeto parecido no resulte eficaz al efecto. También se puede conseguir arrojándola con fuerza contra una superficie de mármol, por ejemplo.

—¡Oh, los suelos de mármol…!

Charlotte lanzó esta exclamación como si las palabras le suscitaran otros pensamientos. Los suelos de mármol le suscitaban ideas, estaban relacionados con muchas cosas, con su vieja Roma y con la vieja Roma del Príncipe, con los palacios del pasado del Príncipe y, un poco, con los de la propia Charlotte, con las posibilidades del futuro del Príncipe, con la suntuosidad del matrimonio de éste, con la opulencia de los Verver. Sin embargo, también pensaba en otras cosas y todo esto ocupó durante unos instantes la imaginación de Charlotte, que preguntó:

—¿El cristal no se rompe cuando es auténtico cristal? Siempre he pensado que la belleza del cristal radica en su dureza.

El vendedor era, a su manera, hombre dado a sutiles distinciones:

—La belleza del cristal radica en que es cristal. Pero su dureza constituye, realmente, su protección.

Después de una pausa, el dueño de la tienda prosiguió:

—El cristal no se rompe como el vidrio vil. Se parte cuando tiene grieta. Muy interesada, Charlotte musitó:

—¡Ah, sí, tiene una grieta!

Bajó la vista, fijándola en la copa dorada, y dijo:

—Con que ¿tiene una grieta? Y el cristal se parte, ¿verdad?

—Por ciertos puntos y de acuerdo con la naturaleza propia del cristal.

—¿Quiere decir que este objeto tiene un punto débil?

Por toda contestación, el dueño de la tienda, sin vacilar, cogió la copa, la levantó y la golpeó con una llave. La copa emitió el más bello y dulce sonido que quepa imaginar. El hombrecillo dijo:

—¿Dónde está el punto débil?

Charlotte reconoció la impertinencia de aquella pregunta:

—Para mí, sólo está en el precio. Soy pobre, muy pobre. De todos modos, muchas gracias. Lo pensaré.

El Príncipe, situado en la calle ante el escaparate, había dado media vuelta sobre sí mismo y escudriñaba el relativamente oscuro interior para averiguar si su amiga se había decidido. Charlotte dijo:

—Me gusta, pero debo pensarlo antes de decidir. El hombre, no sin cierta elegancia, se resignó:

—Lo guardaré hasta que se decida.

Charlotte se había dado cuenta de lo extraño que había sido este cuarto de hora y de que las peculiaridades de Bloomsbury habían conseguido una vez más, en su protesta contra las impresiones que Charlotte había tenido, adueñarse más o menos de ella. Sin embargo, este rasgo de extrañeza bien podía calificarse de menor importancia en comparación con otro suceso que, antes de que se hubieran alejado mucho de la tienda, Charlotte tuvo que aceptar, pues les había afectado al mismo tiempo a ella y al Príncipe. Consistía sencillamente en que los dos, por cierta tácita lógica y cierta extraña inevitabilidad, habían abandonado la idea de seguir buscando. No se lo dijeron, pero siguieron el camino dando por supuesto que habían renunciado a comprar el regalo para Maggie, que habían renunciado sin hacer mención del asunto. Las primeras palabras del Príncipe se refirieron a algo absolutamente distinto:

—Espero que habrá averiguado a su satisfacción, antes de salir de la tienda, cuál era el defecto de la copa.

—Pues no es así. No me he enterado de nada, salvo de que, cuanto más la miraba, más me gustaba, y de que si usted no fuera tan inflexible me hubiera proporcionado el placer de ofrecérsela.

Al escuchar estas palabras el rostro del Príncipe adquirió la expresión más grave que había mostrado en toda la mañana:

—¿Lo dice con toda seriedad o animada por el deseo de hacerme caer en una trampa?

Desorientada, Charlotte preguntó:

—¿De qué trampa puede tratarse?

Él la miró con más dureza aún:

—¿Quiere decir que realmente no lo sabe?

—¿Que no sé qué?

—El defecto que tiene esa copa. ¿Es que no se ha dado cuenta?

Charlotte, mirándole con fijeza, preguntó:

—¿Y cómo ha podido usted verlo desde la calle?

—Lo vi antes de salir de la tienda. Si me salí fue debido precisamente a haberlo visto. No quería que usted y yo hiciéramos otra escena en presencia de ese pillo, y estimé que se daría cuenta de la tara usted misma. Charlotte preguntó:

—¿Considera usted que ese hombre es un pillo? Ha pedido un precio muy moderado.

Después de esperar unos instantes, añadió:

—Cinco libras. Realmente es muy poco.

El Príncipe, sin dejar de mirarla, dijo:

—¿Cinco libras?

—Cinco libras.

Por la actitud del Príncipe quizá cupiera pensar que dudaba de la veracidad de las palabras de Charlotte, pero, en realidad, el Príncipe solamente utilizó estas palabras para dar más énfasis a las suyas:

—Si hubiera pedido cinco chelines, el objeto en cuestión sería caro como regalo. Y ni siquiera si le hubiera costado cinco peniques lo aceptaría.

—¿Cuál es el defecto que tiene?

—Una grieta.

Estas palabras fueron pronunciadas con un acento tan seco, con tal autoridad, que casi la sobresaltaron puesto que, al escucharlas, se sonrojó. La maravillosa seguridad con que había hablado inducía a creer que estaba en lo cierto. Charlotte le preguntó:

—¿Cómo puede estar tan seguro sin haber mirado el objeto?

—Lo miré. Lo vi perfectamente. La historia de ese objeto es patente. No me sorprende que el precio sea bajo.

Charlotte, como si aquel nuevo aspecto del objeto tuviera la virtud de hacerlo todavía más interesante, más extraño y más tierno, se sintió inducida a insistir:

—Pero es exquisito.

—Naturalmente que es exquisito. En esto radica el peligro.

A los ojos de Charlotte se hizo visible entonces una luz, una luz con la que repentina e intensamente resplandeció su amigo. El reflejo de esta luz, mientras Charlotte sonreía al Príncipe, le envolvía la cara:

—El peligro… Ahora lo comprendo… Es usted supersticioso.

—*Per Dio*! ¡Una grieta es una grieta, y un augurio es un augurio!

—¿Tiene miedo?

—*Per Bacco*!

—¿Teme por su felicidad?

—Temo por mi felicidad.

—¿Por su seguridad?

—Por mi seguridad.

Charlotte hizo una pausa y añadió:

—¿Por su matrimonio?

—Por mi matrimonio. Por todo.

Después de pensar durante unos instantes, Charlotte dijo:

—¡Agradezcamos, pues, que, caso de que realmente haya una grieta, lo sepamos! Lo importante es que no seamos destruidos por grietas cuya existencia ignoramos.

Sonriendo con tristeza, Charlotte observó:

—Jamás podremos regalarnos nada el uno al otro.

El Príncipe, tras de pensar un rato, dio la pertinente réplica a estas palabras:

—Las taras se ven. Por lo menos yo las percibo instintivamente. No me equivoco nunca. Esta facultad siempre me protegerá.

Era graciosa la manera en que el Príncipe decía estas cosas, y con ello daba lugar a que ella se sintiera todavía más atraída por él. Palabras como ésas le proporcionaban a Charlotte una visión general o, mejor dicho, una visión especial. A pesar de esto, habló en tono de leve desesperación:

—¿Y qué me protegerá a mí?

—En lo que a mí me concierne, yo.

Después de una pausa, el Príncipe siguió hablando, ahora en tono perfectamente amable:

—Por lo menos sabe que nada tiene que temer de mí. Todo lo que usted acceda a aceptar de mí…

Pero dejó inacabada la frase; Charlotte dijo:

—¿Qué?

—Será perfecto.

Inmediatamente, Charlotte observó:

—Me parece muy bien. Pero, al mismo tiempo, me parece inútil, pues usted habla de la posibilidad de que yo acepte sus cosas, en tanto que se niega a aceptar lo que yo pueda ofrecerle.

Pero incluso a estas palabras supo el Príncipe contestar:

—Impone usted una condición imposible: a saber, que yo mantenga en secreto el obsequio ofrecido por usted.

Charlotte, en presencia del Príncipe, ponderó allí su condición y, luego, bruscamente, hizo un gesto de renuncia. Meneó la cabeza con expresión de desencanto al pensar en lo mucho que le había gustado la idea. Ahora se planteaban demasiadas dificultades. Entonces dijo:

—Mi condición… Bueno, no sigo imponiéndola. Puede usted subirse a las azoteas y gritar a los cuatro vientos todo lo que yo haga.

—¡Ah, bueno…!

El Príncipe había pronunciado estas palabras riendo, y con ellas venía a decir que, si así era el asunto, carecía de importancia. Pero era ya demasiado tarde. Charlotte dijo:

—Ahora ya todo da igual. Me hubiera gustado regalarle la copa. Pero si no la quiere, ya nada puedo ofrecerle.

El Príncipe meditó estas palabras, y, mientras tanto, su rostro volvió a adquirir una expresión grave. Al cabo de unos instantes, advirtió:

—Sin embargo, tengo la seguridad de que algún día tendré deseos de ofrecerle algo.

Ella le miró interrogativamente:

—¿Qué día?

—El día en que usted se case. Sí, porque se casará. Debe casarse.

Charlotte aceptó estas palabras sin contradecirlas, pero motivaron que pronunciara las únicas palabras que hubiera debido pronunciar aquella mañana y que acudieron a sus labios como impulsadas por un resorte:

—¿Para que usted se sienta más tranquilo?

Con maravillosa franqueza, el Príncipe repuso:

—Sí, me sentiré más tranquilo.

Y añadió:

—Ahí tiene usted el coche de alquiler.

El Príncipe había hecho una seña, y el coche se dirigía hacia ellos. Ella no le ofreció la mano en gesto de despedida, pero se dispuso a subir al coche. Sin embargo, antes de hacerlo, dijo las palabras que había pensado mientras esperaba:

—Bien, creo que me casaré con el fin de tener algo de usted con toda libertad.

Segunda parte

Capítulo VII

En Fawns, aquel domingo de otoño se habría podido observar a Adam Verver en el momento de abrir la puerta de la sala de billar con indudable libertad de acción, si hubiera habido allí un espectador para observarlo. Sin embargo, la justificación y base de las energías gastadas en el empujón que había dado a la puerta y en el empujón igualmente fuerte que, para quedar encerrado en la sala, dio de nuevo, se hallaba precisamente en los deseos de estar allí, aunque sólo fuera por breves momentos, solo, solo con el montón de cartas, periódicos y otros envíos sin abrir que durante el desayuno y hasta el momento presente no había tenido oportunidad de examinar. La amplia, cuadrada y limpia sala estaba desierta; sus grandes y claros ventanales daban a terrazas y jardines, al parque y al bosque, al esplendoroso lago artificial, a un horizonte densamente condensado, a las tierras altas de oscuro color azulado, al pueblo dominado por el campanario de la iglesia y a las fuertes sombras de nubes, todo lo cual creaba conjuntamente la sensación, habida cuenta de que todos los demás habían ido a la iglesia, de tener el mundo entero a su disposición. Compartamos, pues, su mundo, aunque sólo sea durante estos momentos, con el señor Verver. El mero hecho de que hubiera salido disparado —como él habría dicho— en busca de soledad, el hecho de su silenciosa huida, casi de puntillas, a lo largo de tortuosos pasillos, esto da a su persona un interés que suscita nuestra atención —tierna hasta llegar casi a la compasión—, y matiza el sentido del aislamiento que el señor Verver acababa de conseguir. Por esto es por lo que debemos hacer constar inmediatamente que este amable caballero solamente pensaba en su personal conveniencia, dicho sea en términos generales, cuando estimaba que otras conveniencias, las de otras personas, habían sido reclamadas y satisfechas. También cabe decir que el señor Verver estimó siempre —ya que así era el talante de su carácter— que las otras personas formaban un numeroso contingente y que, a pesar de que él sólo tenía conciencia de un único vínculo íntimo, de un efecto, de un deber profundamente enraizado en su vida, jamás había sido su destino no estar, durante más de unos cuantos minutos, rodeado y obligado: jamás había gozado íntegramente del alivio de distinguir en qué punto la variopinta llamada de la humanidad, expresada en distintas gradaciones, en zonas concéntricas de menguante intensidad e inoportunidad, se transformaba en la bendita blancura impersonal que su mente, en ocasiones, ansiaba dolorosamente. Esta llamada se difuminaba, lo cual el señor Verver reconocía, pero también era cierto que aún no había vislumbrado el punto en que realmente desaparecía.

De esta manera se había formado el señor Verver una costumbre de poca monta, que era su más íntimo secreto, secreto que ni siquiera a Maggie había confiado; aun cuando el señor Verver consideraba que Maggie lo comprendería como todo lo comprendía, a su juicio, se había formado la inocente triquiñuela de hacer creer que ocasionalmente carecía de conciencia o, por lo menos, que en el campo del cumplimiento del deber había un vacío durante cierto tiempo. Se trataba de un jueguecito al que las pocas personas que estaban lo suficientemente vinculadas al señor Verver para poder descubrirle en el acto de entregarse a él —entre las cuales, por ejemplo, se contaba la señora Assingham—, le atribuían benévolamente el carácter de rareza, en realidad el encanto patético que provoca el hecho de que un adulto conserve un juguete de la infancia. Cuando el señor Verver se disponía a gozar de un momento de aislamiento, lo hacía con la conmovedora mirada de confusión propia del hombre de cuarenta y siete años que ha sido descubierto en el acto de entretenerse con una reliquia de su infancia, como, por ejemplo, pegando la cabeza rota de un

soldadito de juguete, o intentando mover el cerrojo de un rifle de madera. En el caso del señor Verver, esto era una imitación de la depravación que, para divertirse quizá, seguía «practicando». A pesar de la práctica que en ello tenía, no había llegado ni mucho menos a la perfección, por cuanto estos interludios, conseguidos con tan inocente astucia, estaban condenados a ser breves. El señor Verver se había marcado irremisiblemente a sí mismo con la impronta —y de esto sólo él tenía la culpa— del hombre que puede ser interrumpido impunemente. Sin embargo, la mayor maravilla consistía exactamente en que un hombre siempre tan interrumpido hubiera podido llegar, como vulgarmente suele decirse, o mejor dicho, hubiera podido llegar tan pronto al lugar en que se hallaba. Esto revelaba un talento muy especial. Evidentemente esto era lo que el señor Verver tenía. La chispa de fuego, el punto de luz, se hallaba vagamente en algún lugar de su interior, tal como una lámpara emite sus guiños de luz ante el altar en la oscura perspectiva de un templo. La juventud y los primeros años de la edad madura, así como la seca brisa de la oportunidad y el ejemplo norteamericanos, soplaron recientemente contra esta luz, convirtiendo la cámara del cerebro del señor Verver en el más extraño taller de consecución de fortunas. Esta estructura, misteriosa y casi anónima, cuyas ventanas en los momentos de más alta presión, a juicio de observadores y curiosos, jamás parecían resplandecer perceptiblemente, por fuerza tuvo que ser durante ciertos años el albergue de un fuego blanco milagroso, sin precedentes, producido por un medio que se consideraba, en la práctica, que el maestro de aquella forja no podría haber consumido ni aun movido por las mejores intenciones.

El pulso esencial de la llama, la mismísima acción de la temperatura cerebral, llevada a su más alto grado, pero extraordinariamente contenida, estos hechos, en sí mismos, representaban la inmensidad del resultado y se identificaban con la perfección de la máquina, habiendo constituido aquella clase de poder adquisitivo, engendrado y aplicado, que conducía ineludiblemente al éxito de todas sus operaciones. Por el momento, deberá bastarnos una oscura explicación de este fenómeno, otrora en vívida actuación, por cuanto no podemos arrojar sobre la amabilidad de nuestro amigo el peso íntegro de constituir la razón de su historia económica. Cierto es que la amabilidad contribuye al éxito, y se sabe que ha sido base y principio de grandes fortunas. Pero la mente no deja por ello de echar en falta el eslabón necesario para lograr la continuidad, o algo más insolente, en un aspecto, y en otro, la accesibilidad hasta puntos enloquecedores, cuando el éxito es a tan gran escala. La variedad de imaginación ¿no es fatal, en el mundo de los negocios, salvo cuando está tan disciplinada que en nada se distingue de la monotonía? En consecuencia, el señor Verver, durante un nuevo y largo período, un período que extraordinariamente no resultó estéril, había sido inescrutablemente monótono, oculto detrás de una nube iridiscente. La nube era su innato envoltorio, la suave laciedad y, valga la expresión, de su temperamento y de su tono, que sin duda alguna carecía de la capacidad de expresión directa y suficiente como para representar abundancia de pliegues y repliegues; pero sí indicaba la inconfundible cualidad de estar dotado de sensibles antenas. En realidad, el señor Verver todavía estaba obligado en la actualidad a conseguir sus raros momentos de soledad por el medio de fingir cinismo. Su auténtica incapacidad de mantener esta ficción rara vez había hallado mejor ejemplo que en su aceptación de lo inevitable, su aceptación de la llegada, al término de aquel cuarto de hora, de la obligación con la que había sabido que en todo momento debía contar. Un cuarto de hora de egoísmo era cuanto, entre una cosa y otra, el señor Verver podía conseguir por lo general. La señora Rance abrió la puerta más dubitativamente de lo que el señor Verver lo había hecho pero, por otra parte, como si quisiera compensar lo que acabamos de decir, la cerró más enérgicamente al verlo de lo que éste la cerró al ver que en la sala de billar no había nadie. Entonces el señor Verver recordó con fuerza y claridad que había establecido un precedente hacía una semana, Sí, él lo reconocía, en honor de la señora Rance, y se trataba de un reconocimiento que siempre hacía en beneficio de alguien. El domingo anterior, dijo que prefería quedarse en casa, con lo cual quedó expuesto a que le pillaran con las manos en la masa. Para que esto ocurriera, bastaba con que la señora Rance hubiese querido hacer lo mismo; era muy fácil jugarle semejante pasada. No se le había ocurrido al señor Verver hacer los planes necesarios para que ella se ausentara, con lo que en cierto modo habría aniquilado su propia presencia. Si las personas que vivían bajo su propio techo carecían del derecho de no ir a la iglesia, ¿adónde iba a parar, para una mentalidad honesta y justa, el propio derecho a no ir a la iglesia? Su maniobra más sutil había sido sustituir la biblioteca por la sala de billar, ya que fue en la biblioteca donde su huésped, o la huésped de su hija, o la huésped de las señoritas Lutche —el señor Verver no sabía en qué concepto considerar a la señora Rance—, le había encontrado, lo cual no resulta en modo alguno sorprendente. El recuerdo de la duración de la visita que la señora Rance le había hecho en aquella ocasión indujo al señor Verver a pensar que quizá había quedado ya implantada la ley de la reiteración. En dicha ocasión la señora Rance había pasado la mañana

entera con él, y se encontraban todavía en la biblioteca cuando los demás regresaron de dar un paseo al aire libre, debido a que ellos no mostraron gran entusiasmo por salir. Parecía que la señora Rance estimara que dar tal paseo era una especie de subterfugio, una demostración de falta de lealtad. Pero ¿qué pretendía la señora Rance?, ¿qué deseaba que fuera el señor, además de lo que ya había demostrado ser, o sea, un anfitrión paciente y pundonoroso, habida cuenta de que ella había llegado en calidad de extraña y de ningún modo como persona invitada expresamente? Aunque, quizá por esto, pesaba más en la conciencia de su anfitrión la susceptibilidad de la señora Rance. Las señoritas Lutche estaban allí en calidad de antiguas amigas de Maggie, pero la señora Rance estaba allí o, por lo menos originariamente, en calidad de amiga de las señoritas Lutche.

Esta señora no era del Medio Oeste, como ella decía no sin insistencia, sino de Nueva Jersey, Rhode Island o Delaware, de uno de los estados más pequeños y más íntimos; el señor Verver no recordaba cuál, a pesar de que también esto lo repetía dicha señora. En justicia debemos decir que no era propio de una persona como el señor Verver llegar a preguntarse si el grupo que en la próxima ocasión se congregara en su casa sería reclutado por algún amigo o amiga de la señora Rance, y así sucedía, que el señor Verver había podido advertir muy a las claras que la señora Rance prefería que las señoritas Lutche salieran de casa a que se quedaran para ampliar el actual círculo de conversación, y porque, asimismo, y con carácter más esencial, la vinculación del señor Verver con tan irónica cuestión, considerada en general, radicaba sobre todo no tanto en su personal interés, cuanto en el hábito de facilitar la vida a los demás. El señor Verver sabía mantener una separación entre sus incomodidades y sus resentimientos de una manera que en él era natural, aunque en realidad la suma de éstos había sido siempre de mayor cuantía; ello se debía, hasta cierto punto, a la escasez de las primeras. El señor Verver habría reconocido fácilmente, después del debido análisis, que su mayor incomodidad radicaba en que se diera por supuesto que, debido a que tenía dinero, también tenía poder. Sin duda alguna, esta atribución de poder ejercía en él una fuerte presión, proyectada desde todos los puntos. Todos tenían necesidad del poder de uno, en tanto que las necesidades de uno, en el mejor de los casos, no parecían más que una triquiñuela para no compartir el poder. El efecto de una reserva tan simple y mezquinamente defensiva bastaría, en la mayoría de los casos, para desacreditar la causa. En consecuencia, a pesar de que ser perpetuamente considerado como agente de infinito poder complicaba la vida, tal desdicha no era la más grave de las que un hombre valeroso podía quejarse. Además, las quejas eran un lujo, y el señor Verver temía que le acusaran de codicia. La otra acusación, la constante acusación de ser hombre capaz de «hacer cosas», carecería de base si él no hubiera sido, desde un principio —y ahí estaba el quid de la cuestión—, amante de los lujos. Sus labios estaban cerrados y, además, por un resorte conectado con el movimiento de los ojos. Éstos le revelaban lo que había conseguido, el lugar al que había llegado, que era el punto más alto de la colina de sus dificultades, de aquella alta y empinada espiral que había comenzado a ascender sinuosamente a la edad de veinte años, en cuya cumbre había una plataforma en la que sólo podían estar, en pie, media docena más de individuos y desde la que se veía, si uno quería, los reinos de la tierra.

De todas maneras, el caso es que los ojos del señor Verver vieron cómo la señora Rance avanzaba hacia él, sin atribuir a este movimiento un sentimiento de grosera avidez por parte de dicha señora y sin discernir siquiera aires de triunfo en la vívida expresión de la dama. No, ya que lo que tendría suprema importancia sería, ajuicio del señor Verver, el concepto que de él se formaría la señora Rance por haber intentado despistarla escondiéndose en la biblioteca, lo cual difícilmente puede decirse que no fuera la verdadera intención del señor Verver. No le era fácil ahora, a pesar de los reiterados actos en este sentido, que cariñosa y humorísticamente consideraba ya como práctica sistemática, no sentirse avergonzado. La sala de billar no era, en esta crisis concreta, lugar natural ni elegante para el principal ocupante de una tan amplia mansión, y además revelaba el temor, infundado desde luego, que tenía de que la señora Rance le hiciera una escena. Si le hubiera acusado de esquivarla, el señor Verver habría quedado literalmente hecho cisco, pero superó inmediatamente ese temor. ¿Acaso no sería más probable que la señora Rance, con la finalidad de resaltar la afinidad entre los dos, aceptara y, en cierta manera, explotara aquella anomalía, dándole carácter romántico y quizá, incluso, cómico? Ello daba muestras de que el estar los dos en semejante lugar no representaba para ellos obstáculo alguno, a pesar de que la vasta mesa cubierta con pardo paño de Holanda mediaba entre uno y otro como un desierto de arena. No, ella no cruzó aquel desierto, sino que lo rodeó, de modo y manera que el señor Verver, para conseguir que la mesa cumpliera la función de obstáculo, tendría que situarse al otro lado, como si se entregara a un juego infantil o a una comedia de mal gusto, para acabar siendo perseguido o afablemente acosado. Tenía plena conciencia de que esto no

ocurriría en esta ocasión y, por el momento, ante él se alzaba solamente la posibilidad de que la señora Rance le propusiera golpear un poco las bolas con el taco. Pensó que debía estimular su imaginación para encontrar el modo de esquivar este peligro. Sin embargo, ¿a santo de qué necesitaba él erigir defensas en este caso? ¿Por qué razón calificaba de peligros hechos que en sí mismos no debían serlo? El peligro profundo, el único peligro que, en cuanto a idea, le helaba la sangre hubiera sido la posibilidad de que la señora Rance le pidiera en matrimonio, de que le planteara tan terrible problema. Pero en este asunto carecía de peligrosidad, pues podía demostrarle, en contra de sus pretensiones, que tenía marido, un marido de existencia real y en modo alguno desvirtuada.

Era cierto que el marido de la señora Rance se encontraba en Norteamérica, en Texas, en Nebraska, en Arizona, en algún lugar que, contemplado desde la vieja Fawns House, en el condado de Kent, apenas podía considerarse lugar concreto alguno. Contemplado desde lejos, aquel lugar parecía algo perdido, confuso, ilusorio en algún punto del gran desierto de la separación entre los cónyuges. La señora Rance, sin embargo, mantenía a aquel pobre hombre atado a ella, lo despreciaba, y el recuerdo que de él guardaba era tan imperfecto que apenas cabía decir que estuviera en su memoria, pero, a pesar de todo, el marido existía sin atenuantes. Sí, las señoritas Lutche le habían visto en carne y hueso, como manifestaron con ansiosa diligencia. Sin embargo, cuando fueron interrogadas por separado, las respectivas descripciones que del marido dieron no coincidían. En el peor de los casos, si se daba el peor de los casos, aquel marido sería la dificultad de la señora Rance y, en consecuencia, constituiría el recio baluarte en que los demás varones se defenderían. Esto, que era de una lógica perfecta y sin fisuras, consolaba al señor Verver menos de lo que hubiera debido. Éste no sólo temía el peligro, sino también la idea del peligro; dicho en otras palabras, sentía un obsesivo temor de sí mismo. Principalmente, la señora Rance se alzaba ante él como un símbolo, el símbolo del supremo esfuerzo que él, el señor Verver, tendría que hacer a su juicio, tarde o temprano. Este esfuerzo consistiría en decir «no». Vivía sumido en el terror de tener que hacerlo. Llegaría el momento, era sólo cuestión de tiempo. Le pedirían en matrimonio, y entonces tendría que hacer una cosa extremadamente desagradable. Momentos había en que el señor Verver casi deseaba no estar tan seguro de que diría que no. Sin embargo, se conocía a sí mismo demasiado bien para ponerlo en duda. Sabía con certeza en qué momento, cuando se produjera la crisis, cortaría por lo sano. Ello se debía al matrimonio de Maggie y a su actual felicidad —felicidad mayor que la que gozaba anteriormente, según el parecer del señor Verver. Le parecía ahora que antes no tenía por qué pensar en semejantes asuntos. No se le habían planteado y parecía como si hubiera sido Maggie quien los hubiera mantenido alejados. Solamente era su hija, que en efecto lo era más que nunca, aunque en ciertos aspectos Maggie le había protegido como si fuera más que una hija. Había hecho por él más de lo que él sabía, a pesar de lo mucho que afortunadamente sabía que había hecho. Y si Maggie actualmente hacía por él más que nunca, para compensarle por lo que ella llamaba el cambio de vida, de todas maneras la situación del señor Verver era armónica con la actividad de su hija, ya que su situación consistía sencillamente en que tenía más cosas que hacer que en cualquier momento anterior.

Entre una cosa y otra, no había tenido tanto que hacer antes de regresar de América, en donde habían pasado veinte meses antes de volver a establecerse en Inglaterra, a pesar de que la estancia era temporal y sólo tenía carácter experimental, antes de sentir la sensación, ahora totalmente definida por el señor Verver, de un ambiente doméstico purificado y luminoso, que producía en sus vidas personales el efecto de abrir ante ellos unas perspectivas más amplias y unos más amplios espacios. Parecía que la presencia del yerno del señor Verver, incluso antes de ser su yerno, había llenado el escenario y, si se tenía todo en cuenta, había dado fijeza al futuro de una forma muy hermosa y fecunda, en modo alguno incómoda o de cierta manera que no hubiera sido de desear. Y esto era así porque el Príncipe, cuyas dimensiones ahora habían quedado prácticamente determinadas, seguía siendo la misma «gran realidad», con lo que el cielo se había alzado a mayor altura, los horizontes se habían ampliado e incluso el terreno había adquirido mayor extensión ante ellos, para estar en la debida proporción con el Príncipe, para que todo quedará a una cómoda escala. Al principio, ciertamente, la unión decente y modesta de otros tiempos entre padre e hija se había parecido en gran manera a una agradable plaza pública, en el corazón de una ciudad antigua, en la que súbitamente se hubiera colocado, por ejemplo, una gran iglesia neoclásica u otro edificio de gran fachada, de modo que el resto del lugar, el espacio ante el monumento, sus alrededores, la anchura de la calle y del paisaje, la amplitud del abovedado cielo, todo hubiera quedado afectado, temporalmente. Pero, a decir verdad, ni siquiera en aquel entonces esta alteración fue desconcertante, habida cuenta del gran estilo que aquella fachada tenía para la mirada crítica o, por lo menos, inteligente, y del alto puesto que ocupaba

entre las de su clase. El fenómeno que se había producido a partir de entonces, tanto si originariamente hubiera sido previsible como si no, no había sido, naturalmente, un milagro ocurrido de la noche a la mañana, sino que se desarrolló tan paulatina, tan silenciosa y fácilmente que desde aquella atalaya de la amplia y boscosa finca de Fawns, con su mansión de ochenta estancias, como se decía, con su amplio parque, con sus acres de jardín y con la majestad del lago artificial, aunque, para una persona tan familiarizada con los «grandes lagos», como el señor Verver, quizá le pareciera un tanto ridículo; no se advertía visiblemente la transición ni retrospectivamente se veía violencia alguna en el reajuste. La iglesia neoclásica seguía presente, pero la *piazza* gozaba de independencia. El sol la iluminaba plenamente, el aire circulaba y los transeúntes circulaban tanto como el aire, los límites se hallaban lejos, el paseo alrededor de la plaza era agradable, el extremo oriental era bello, tanto como, a su manera, lo era el occidental; había también puertas laterales entre las dos grandes puertas monumentales estilizadas de acuerdo con la escuela arquitectónica, como ocurre en todas las grandes iglesias que se precien de tales. En resumen, mediante un proceso como éste, el Príncipe había dejado de ser un temido obstáculo para su suegro, sin dejar de ser una firme característica de su entorno.

También debemos decir que en ningún momento el señor Verver se había alarmado hasta el punto de llevar detallada crónica de cómo se tranquilizó. A pesar de todo, no habría sido incapaz, ni se habría mostrado remiso en comunicar confidencialmente a la persona adecuada la idea que de aquella historia se había formado. Evidentemente, la persona adecuada para recibir tan luminosa confidencia no faltaba y había tomado la forma de Fanny Assingham; ésta, ciertamente, no era la primera vez, ni mucho menos, que se convertía en receptora de sus confidencias y sin el menor género de dudas, llevada por la plenitud de su interés y con plena garantía, en estos momentos ya habría repetido el secreto del señor Verver. Todo lo antedicho, o sea, la gran amplificación de los espacios, se debía primordialmente a un hecho, que consistía en que el Príncipe, por fortuna, no había resultado esquinado o anguloso. El señor Verver empleaba estos términos constantemente para calificar al marido de su hija, como a menudo los empleaba para referirse a frases en relación con personas y sociedades con que se había encontrado. Le era muy propio utilizar constantemente estos términos, como si con ellos pudiera iluminar el mundo o la senda que él seguía, aun cuando para algunos de sus interlocutores estos términos fueran de mucho menor alcance. Era muy cierto que, cuando se refería a la señora Assingham, jamás sabía cuál era el alcance que sus palabras tenían para ella, porque nunca ni en nada le contradecía, en todo se mostraba de acuerdo con él y le rodeaba de tan sistemática consideración, de tan predeterminada ternura, que casi parecía —como un día le dijo él irritado — que estuviera cuidando a un niño enfermo. La había acusado de no tomarle en serio, y la señora Assingham había contestado —lo cual no le atemorizó por tratarse de sus palabras— que «le tomaba» religiosamente, con adoración. Volvió a reír, como antes había reído, cuando el señor Verver aplicó aquel justo y feliz vocablo referente al resultado de sus relaciones con el Príncipe, con un efecto particularmente extraño si tenemos en cuenta que ella no había preguntado siquiera el significado del término. Sin embargo, a la señora Assingham difícilmente podía entusiasmarle tanto el término descubierto como le entusiasmaba a su descubridor, el señor Verver. Le entusiasmaba tanto que, para mayor placer, lo estudió y desarrolló. Algunas veces manifestó casi públicamente lo que habría ocurrido en el caso de que se hubiesen producido fricciones, valga la expresión. Un día lo manifestó francamente al personaje en cuestión, dirigió al Príncipe el halagador juicio que le merecía, e incluso expresó explícitamente el peligro que, gracias a ello, habían evitado en su notable relación. ¡Oh, si el Príncipe hubiera sido anguloso! En este caso, nadie habría podido prever las consecuencias. El señor Verver habló —al igual que en la ocasión en que conversó de ello con la señora Assingham— como si comprendiera todas las realidades que, sin excepción, la angulosidad comporta.

Evidentemente, para el señor Verver, la angulosidad era una última idea, un concepto de suma vivencia. Mediante esta palabra bien hubiera podido referirse a los ángulos agudos o a las duras esquinas, a toda la pétrea calidad punzante y cortante de la grandiosa geometría de aquella iglesia neoclásica. El señor Verver percibía todos los rasgos felices de aquel contacto que, sorprendentemente, casi pasmosamente, era contacto con líneas obedientes y superficies curvas. El señor Verver había dicho: «Eres redondo, mi querido muchacho, en todo tu ser, en tus diversas partes, eres inagotablemente redondo, a pesar de que, con toda probabilidad, hubieras podido ser abominablemente cuadrado». Había añadido: «Sin embargo, no tengo la seguridad de que tu masa, considerada en general, no sea cuadrada, abominable o no. La abominación poco importa, pues eres irremediablemente redondo. Esto en ti es una de esas cosas que se siente, al menos las siento yo, como si se tocasen con la mano. Imagina que hubieras sido formado íntegramente mediante una

gran cantidad de pequeños rombos piramidales, como aquella maravillosa parte del Palacio Ducal de Venecia, lo cual es muy bello en un edificio, pero condenadamente desagradable en un hombre con el cual uno se tiene que rozar, principalmente cuando este hombre es un pariente próximo. Me parece verlo, todos ellos salientes, sí, me parecer ver esos diamantes arquitectónicos tallados con que me hubieras rascado las partes más sensibles. Sí, los diamantes me hubieran rascado —sin duda alguna es la manera más limpia de ser rascado—, y, a fin de cuentas, hubiera quedado reducido a picadillo. Contrariamente, vivir contigo es como vivir con el más puro y perfecto cristal. Te he dicho lo que pienso, así, tal como me ha venido a la cabeza. Espero que lo hayas comprendido y aceptado». Verdaderamente el Príncipe había aceptado la idea, a su manera, pues a la sazón estaba ya muy acostumbrado a aceptarlas. Quizá nada hubiera podido confirmar mejor la descripción que de la superficie del Príncipe había hecho el señor Verver como la manera en que aquellas doradas gotas se deslizaron suavemente sobre ella. No quedaron detenidas en grieta alguna, no quedaron apresadas en cavidades de ningún género. La uniforme lisura traicionaba al rocío, pero, por el momento, gracias a él, adquiría un tono más vivo. En otras palabras, el joven Príncipe sonrió abiertamente como si asintiera, por principios y por hábito, a más de lo que comprendía. Le gustaban todos los síntomas de que la situación era buena, pero no le importaba gran cosa saber por qué lo era.

En lo tocante a las personas entre las que vivía el Príncipe desde el día de su matrimonio, las razones que tan a menudo daban de lo anterior —mucho más a menudo de lo que el Príncipe había oído darlas con anterioridad— eran, en términos generales, el elemento por el cual él más difería de ellas. Su suegro y su esposa eran, a fin de cuentas, las personas más importantes entre cuantas trataba ahora el Príncipe. Pero él jamás sabía con certeza la impresión que en esto, en aquello o en lo de más allá causaría a dichas personas. Muy a menudo se daba el caso notable de que estas personas entendían cosas que el Príncipe no había querido expresar y, no menos a menudo y de modo no menos notable, no entendían las cosas que había querido expresar. El Príncipe se había amparado en una explicación de carácter general: «No tenemos los mismos valores». Con lo cual quería decir que medían la importancia de las cosas de una forma diferente. Evidentemente, las «curvas» del Príncipe eran importantes debido a que tenían carácter imprevisto o, aún más, inconcebible. Pero cuando uno había dado siempre por supuesta la existencia de curvas, y en cantidades mucho mayores, como ocurría en el relegado viejo mundo del Príncipe, uno no quedaba sorprendido de que el trato con el prójimo fuera posible, de la misma forma que uno no queda sorprendido al encontrarse en el segundo piso de una casa con escalera interior. En realidad, en la ocasión a que nos referimos, el Príncipe había dado un tratamiento harto diligente al tema de la aprobación que su persona merecía por parte del señor Verver. Bien podemos presumir que la pronta respuesta del Príncipe fue efecto, en buena medida, de cierto amado recuerdo que dio a sus palabras de agradecimiento suma soltura. «Bueno, si soy un cristal, me gusta que sea un cristal perfecto, pues creo que cuando un cristal tiene grietas o taras, se puede adquirir a muy bajo precio.» Se calló para no dar a su ingeniosidad el énfasis que le habría supuesto decir que no había modo de conseguirle a bajo precio. Y, sin la menor duda, fue ejemplo de buen gusto que entre ellos imperase que el señor Verver no hubiera aprovechado aquella oportunidad. Sin embargo, lo que ahora tiene más importancia para nosotros es la relación de esto último con dichos aspectos, y la trascendencia de su complacida convicción de que el carácter del Príncipe, como objeto precioso y representativo, no ofrecía riesgos de fricción. Los objetos preciosos representativos, las grandes pinturas antiguas y otras obras de arte, las bellas e importantes «piezas» de oro, plata, esmalte, cerámica, marfil y bronce, hasta tal punto se habían multiplicado hasta tal punto, alrededor del señor Verver durante largos años, y en su calidad de reto a la adquisición y al goce, habían ocupado sus facultades mentales hasta constituir en gran medida la base de su aceptación del Príncipe como pretendiente a la mano de su hija.

Además de lo mucho que importó la buena impresión que había causado a su hija el aspirante a su mano, éste había revelado estar en posesión de las grandes señales y pruebas demostrativas de los más altos signos de autenticidad, que el señor Verver había aprendido a distinguir en las piezas de primordial transparencia. Ahora, Adam Verver era hombre enterado, concienzudamente enterado y, en su fuero interno, estaba convencido de que no había nadie en Europa ni en América que, en cuanto a estimaciones, fuera menos capaz que él de cometer vulgares errores. Jamás se había considerado infalible, ya que era impropio de su manera de ser, pero, con la salvedad de los naturales afectos, no había conocido goce mayor, de carácter íntimo y personal, que el de darse cuenta, por vez primera, y de forma absolutamente imprevista, que tenía espíritu de *connaisseur*. Al igual que tantas otras personas, en el curso de sus lecturas, había quedado impresionado por el soneto de Keats referente al recio Cortés al hallarse ante el Pacífico, pero probablemente pocas personas habían vivido una experiencia personal que tan devotamente estuviera

de acuerdo con la imagen del poeta como el señor Verver. Hasta tal punto y en un determinado momento, tuvo el señor Verver clara conciencia de la manera en que había contemplado su Pacífico, que un par de lecturas de las inmortales líneas bastó para que le quedaran grabadas en su memoria. Su «Pico en Darien» fue el repentino momento que transformó su vida, el momento de percibir, con un mudo respingo interior semejante al bajo gemido de la pasión mal reprimida, que ante él tenía un mundo por conquistar, y que podía conquistarlo si lo intentaba. Había sido lo mismo que volver una página del libro de la vida, había sido como si una página durante largo tiempo inerte se hubiera levantado, con sólo tocarla, y que, al dar rápidamente la vuelta, hubiera agitado el aire de tal manera que hubiese enviado a su cara la mismísima brisa de las Islas Doradas. En aquel mismo instante, saquear las Islas Doradas se convirtió en su tarea para el futuro y la belleza de esta misión —lo cual era lo más portentoso— se encontraba más en el pensamiento que en la actividad. El pensamiento radicaba en la afinidad del Genio o, por lo menos, del Buen Gusto, con algo que había en su interior, con cierta adormecida inteligencia de la que ahora adquiría bruscamente conciencia, cosa que le afectó como si, en méritos de una simple vuelta de tuerca, hubiera cambiado totalmente su mundo intelectual. En cierta manera, se sentía hermanado con los grandes visionarios, con los grandes patrocinadores y sacerdotes de la belleza y quizá, a fin de cuentas, no estuviera muy por debajo de los grandes productores y creadores. Con anterioridad, el señor Verver no había sido nada semejante. Decidida y terriblemente, no lo había sido. Pero, ahora, comprendía por qué había sido lo que había sido, por qué había fracasado y no había llegado a la altura que hubiera debido, incluso en sus más grandes éxitos y, ahora, en una sola noche magnífica, vio el inmenso significado de la carrera que le esperaba.

Fue en el curso de la primera visita que hizo a Europa, es decir, la primera visita después de la muerte de su esposa, contando su hija diez años, cuando se encendió aquella luz en su mente, e incluso supo por qué, en una anterior ocasión, la del viaje de luna de miel, la luz no se encendió. En aquella anterior ocasión, el señor Verver «compró», en la medida en que pudo, pero compró casi íntegramente para el frágil ser que llevaba a su lado, ser que tenía sus fantasías, aunque todas referentes al arte, maravilloso para los dos, de la Rue de Paix, las costosas originalidades auténticas de los modistos y de los joyeros. Los caprichos de su esposa —demacrada y desconcertada mujer fantasmal, adornada con una pálida flor, casi grotescamente vestida, según el actual gusto del señor Verver, atada con un gran lazo de satén comprado en el Boulevard — consistían principalmente en cintas, encajes y hermosos tejidos, todo ello curiosa y patética demostración de la desorientación que padecían, en tanto que pareja de recién casados, ante una situación tan oportuna. El señor Verver todavía se estremecía, aunque no mucho, al recordar el sentido en que la pobre muchacha había ejercido presión, con su cariñoso apoyo, desde luego, a la hora de efectuar compras y de satisfacer la curiosidad. Eran, éstas, imágenes vacilantes, surgidas de un anterior ocaso, que, debido a la piedad del señor Verver, alejaban a su esposa, situándola en un pasado más remoto de lo que el señor Verver quería que su vida en común y su juvenil afecto parecieran pertenecer. Aplicando rigurosos criterios, es preciso reconocer que, aunque resultara extraño, a la madre de Maggie no le faltaba la fe, sino cómo utilizarla, ya que la había ejercido entusiasta e incansablemente, transformándola en pretexto de inocentes aberraciones, con respecto a las cuales el filosófico paso del tiempo convertiría todas las lágrimas en dulzuras. Y, como sea que se amaban el uno al otro, la inteligencia del señor Verver, de más alto orden, sufrió temporalmente las consecuencias. ¡Cuántas fueron las frivolidades, enormidades y aberraciones en lo tocante a decoración e ingenio que la señora Verver había conseguido que su esposo, antes de que en este aspecto se abrieran las compuertas de su inteligencia, considerara bellas! En ocasión de meditar, ya que el señor Verver era un pobre hombre que daba vueltas y más vueltas a la cabeza, partidario de los placeres silenciosos —de la misma forma que era capaz de silenciosos dolores—, llegaba incluso a preguntarse qué habría sido de su inteligencia, en aquella esfera en la que más y más exclusivamente la ejercitaría, si la influencia de su esposa por obra de los extraños designios de la vida, no hubiera desaparecido prontamente. Teniendo en cuenta el cariño que sentía por ella, ¿le hubiera rodeado de una jungla de vulgares errores? ¿Le hubiera impedido escalar hasta su alta cima? ¿0 quizá hubiera podido acompañarle hasta tan alto punto, en donde él hubiera podido señalarle, como Cortés a sus compañeros, los descubrimientos prometidos? De todas maneras, se da por supuesto que entre los compañeros de Cortés no había una verdadera señora. El señor Verver dejó que este hecho histórico influyera en su criterio.

Capítulo VIII

Sin embargo, lo que de todos modos no estuvo siempre oculto a su mente, en lo tocante a sus años de tinieblas, fue una verdad mucho menos aborrecible. Se debía una vez más a los extraños designios de la vida: los años de tinieblas habían sido requisito indispensable para que llegaran los años de luz. Una mano más sabia de lo que al principio él mismo creía le había mantenido ocupado en la tarea de cierta clase de adquisiciones, a modo de ensayo de otro tipo de adquisiciones, y aquella tarea primera habría sido débil y deficiente si la buena fe hubiera sido menor. La relativa ceguera del señor Verver había dado paso a la buena fe; y esta buena fe, a su vez, había abonado la tierra de sus buenas cualidades para que en ella floreciera la idea suprema. Era preciso que al señor Verver no le gustara forjar y sudar, y también era preciso que le gustara pulir y acumular. Por lo menos, esto último era algo que no tenía más remedio que creer que le gustaba, de la misma forma que había creído que le gustaba el cálculo trascendente, la apuesta imaginativa y la creación de nuevas cosas de su interés que suponía el olvido de otras anteriores, incluso la tonta vulgaridad de ser el primero en entrar o en salir. Pero esto fue dejando de ser verdad debido a que la idea suprema crecía constantemente y arraigaba más y más hondo, bajo todo lo demás, en la cálida y fecunda tierra. El señor Verver, sin saberlo, había estado en pie, había caminado y había trabajado sobre los lugares en que estaba enterrada su idea; y el hecho de su fortuna hubiera sido, en sí mismo, algo estéril si el primer brote de aquella idea no habría salido a la luz del día. Por una parte, estaba la fealdad de la que se había librado en su edad madura y, por otra parte, portento de portentos, se hallaba la belleza que podía coronar su vejez. Sin duda alguna, el señor Verver era más feliz de lo que merecía, pero es fácil que así ocurra cuando uno es feliz. Había avanzado por caminos tortuosos, pero había llegado al lugar deseado, y ¿había hombre alguno en la tierra que ocupara con más rectitud que él el lugar que ocupaba? Su actuación no sólo contaba con todas las aprobaciones de la civilización, sino que era civilización condensada, concretada, consumada, levantada con sus propias manos como una casa sobre una peña, una casa en cuyas ventanas y puertas abiertas a agradecidos y sedientos millones, resplandecería el más alto conocimiento, el sumo conocimiento, para bendecir la tierra. En esta casa, que sería sobre todo un regalo a su ciudad y estado adoptivos, el señor Verver podía apreciar debidamente la urgencia de liberarlos de la fealdad de la servidumbre, con este museo de museos, palacio de arte que destacaría por su carácter compacto como por compacto resplandece un templo griego; receptáculo de tesoros a buen resguardo, su espíritu vivía casi plenamente, al día, compensando, como él hubiera dicho, el tiempo perdido, y su espíritu merodeaba por el pórtico en espera de que llegara el momento de los últimos ritos.

Estos serían «los ejercicios de apertura» de la augusta consagración del lugar. El señor Verver se daba perfecta cuenta de que su imaginación corría más que su juicio, porque todavía quedaba mucho por hacer antes de que pudieran apreciarse los primeros efectos. Los cimientos existían ya los muros se estaban levantando y la estructura general había quedado ya determinada, pero la rudeza de las prisas estaba prohibida en una cosa tan estrechamente vinculada a la paciencia y a la piedad; por cuanto el señor Verver se traicionaría a sí mismo si diera cima a un monumento de la religión que deseaba propagar, la religión de la pasión ejemplar, la pasión por la perfección a cualquier precio, sin que tuviera, por lo menos, un toque de esa majestad hija de la demora. Todavía estaba muy lejos de saber dónde terminaría, pero estaba admirablemente seguro de cómo empezaría. No empezaría con una colección reducida, sino que comenzaría

con una gran colección, de cuya grandeza, ni siquiera en el caso de querer, podía determinar los límites. El señor Verver no se había privado de manifestarlo así a sus conciudadanos, consumidores y suministradores, en sus propios dominios y en los adyacentes, con cómicos dibujos y textos, escritos con grandes letras, todos los días «compuestos», impresos, publicados, doblados y entregados, basados en su presuntuosa imitación del caracol. Para él, en virtud de la irónica comparación, el caracol se había convertido en el más simpático ser viviente de la naturaleza, y su regreso a Inglaterra, del que nosotros somos testigos, no había sido ajeno a dicha consideración. Indicaba lo que él quería que indicase, es decir, que en aquella materia no necesitaba que nadie del mundo entero le diera instrucciones. Un par de años más en Europa, un par de años de renovada proximidad a los cambios y a las oportunidades, de reavivada sensibilidad a las corrientes del mercado, complementarían aquella sabiduría coherente, aquel concreto matiz de ilustrada convicción que quería mantener a todo trance. No cabía decir que fueran buenas las apariencias de toda una familia dedicada a vagabundear y a esperar, porque, desde el nacimiento de su nieto, formaban una familia, pero, a su juicio, en el mundo entero y en cuestión de apariencias sólo había una que pudiera importarle. Le gustaba que una obra de arte de elevado precio «tuviera las apariencias» de ser del maestro al que quizá falsamente se atribuía, pero el señor Verver había dejado de conocer todo lo demás que en el mundo había, por sus apariencias.

En líneas generales, el señor Verver contemplaba la vida desde gran altura y en la medida en que lo hacía como coleccionista, lo hacía, eso sí, como abuelo. En la categoría de preciosas piezas menudas jamás había tenido en sus manos cosa tan preciosa como el Principino, el primer hijo de su hija, cuya italiana denominación era inagotable fuente de divertido goce para él, quien lo acariciaba y mecía, y poco le faltaba para tirarlo al aire y volver a cogerlo, como jamás había podido hacer con otro ejemplo anterior, parecidamente insólito, de *pâte tendre*. Cogía al niño de los brazos de la niñera con una insistencia que sólo era obstaculizada lamentablemente por algo parecido a la obstrucción que significaban, con respecto a su contenido, los cristales correderos que cerraban las altas vitrinas. En esta nueva relación, algo, sin duda claramente beatífico, confirmaba al señor Verver la sensación de que ninguna de sus silenciosas respuestas a las públicas detracciones, a las provincianas vulgaridades, era tan legítimamente directa como el simple hecho de su actitud —reduzcámoslo a esto, decía él— adoptada durante aquellas tranquilas semanas en Fawns. Esa actitud era lo único que deseaba conseguir en aquellas semanas, y estaba gozando de ella incluso más de lo que había previsto, gozaba de ella a pesar de la señora Rance, a pesar de las señoritas Lutche, a pesar de la pequeña preocupación que le causaba el convencimiento de que Fanny Assingham le reservaba algo que, por el momento, se callaba, aunque tenía plena conciencia, conciencia rebosante como la copa rebosa de vino escanciado con excesiva generosidad, de que por haber dado su consentimiento al matrimonio de su hija, daba con ello, valga la expresión, el consentimiento a que se produjera un cambio, de modo que todo lo que le rodeaba era exactamente consentimiento vivificado, matrimonio demostrado, y el cambio, dicho en pocas palabras, tenía carácter definitivo. El señor Verver podía evocar su anterior conciencia matrimonial, que aún no se encontraba fuera del alcance de una vaga reflexión. Se había supuesto a sí mismo y, sobre todo, había supuesto a su esposa tan casada como la que más; sin embargo, se preguntaba si acaso su estado había merecido realmente tal nombre, si su unión había tenido la bella gradación que tenía la pareja, en sí. De un modo especial, desde el nacimiento del niño, en Nueva York —culminación de su reciente período norteamericano, tan felizmente conseguida—, la pareja causaba al señor Verver la impresión de haber llevado aquella belleza a un punto más alto, más profundo, más avanzado, en realidad hasta un punto que no era competencia de la imaginación del señor Verver seguirlo. Extraordinaria sin ponderación posible era una de las ramificaciones de la muda sensación de maravilla que ponía de relieve la modestia del señor Verver. Se trataba de la oscura duda que al cabo de los años se despertaba en su fuero interno, acerca de si la madre de Maggie había sido, a fin de cuentas, capaz del máximo, del máximo de ternura, quería decir el señor Verver, en el significado que el término tenía para él, del máximo respeto a la realidad de estar casada. Maggie sí, Maggie sí era capaz en sí misma, en la presente sazón; era divinamente exquisita, al máximo. Ésta era la impresión que, con un poco de abstracción de las consideraciones de orden práctico y de tacto en el comportamiento, por el respeto a la belleza y a la santidad anejas, casi equivalentes al pasmo maravilloso y atemorizado, ésta era la impresión, decíamos, que Maggie causaba diariamente a su padre. Ella era igual que su madre, ciertamente, pero también era algo más que su madre, y así Maggie se convirtió en una nueva luz para el señor Verver; resultaba curioso, pues, que en las presentes circunstancias fuera posible que Maggie llegara a superar a su madre.

Él podía revivir, casi en todos los momentos de paz y de tranquilidad, el largo proceso de los inicios de

sus relaciones con sus actuales intereses, unos inicios que se debían solamente a él, como los que se basaban en la audacia de un joven que, sin credenciales, aborda a un hombre ilustre, traba conocimiento con él o forja una verdadera amistad por el hecho de dirigir la palabra a un transeúnte desconocido. En ese asunto, el verdadero amigo del señor Verver sería su propia mente, con la que nadie le había puesto en relación. Él había llamado a la puerta de esa casa esencialmente privada; su llamada, para ser sinceros, no fue inmediatamente atendida; en consecuencia, después de esperar y de volver a llamar, por fin consiguió entrar, pero lo hizo nervioso y dando vueltas al sombrero con las manos, intimidado como un extraño; o probando diversas llaves, como un ladrón en la noche. Sólo con el paso del tiempo había adquirido confianza, pero tan pronto hubo tomado posesión del lugar se quedó en él para siempre. Es preciso reconocer que el éxito se basaba en un principio de orgullo. Se trataba de un orgullo debido a su condición natural, puesto que basarlo en su dinero habría sido un orgullo debido a algo adquirido fácilmente. El justo motivo de satisfacción era la dificultad vencida, y la dificultad del señor Verver —debido precisamente a su modestia— había sido creer en su facilidad. Éste era el problema en que había trabajado hasta solucionarlo. Actualmente dicha solución contribuía, más que cualquier otra cosa, a que sintiera que sus pies se asentaban firmemente en el suelo y que sus días discurrieran felizmente. Cuando quería sentirse satisfecho, le bastaba con seguir mentalmente la trayectoria de su inmenso avance. En esto radicaba todo; en que el avance no había sido de otra persona, pasando falsa e innoblemente como avance suyo. Pensar en lo servil que habría podido ser equivalía, en términos absolutos, a respetarse a sí mismo; y era, en realidad, admirarse a sí mismo todo lo que quisiera, en cuanto hombre libre. El más bello resorte que siempre respondía cuando el señor Verver lo tocaba, estaba siempre allí, presto a ser accionado; este resorte era el recuerdo del amanecer de su libertad, en un alba toda ella rosa y plata, en el curso de un invierno dividido entre Florencia, Roma y Nápoles, unos tres años después de la muerte de su esposa. Fue el silencioso amanecer de la revelación romana, principalmente, el que con más facilidad recobraba el señor Verver, juntamente con aquella peculiar manera en que habían vivido príncipes y papas, antes que él, y fue allí donde el reconocimiento de su facultad se le hizo patente. Él era, a la sazón, un simple ciudadano norteamericano que se alojaba en un hotel en el que, a veces, durante largos días, había veinte clientes más como él, pero el señor Verver creía que no había habido papa ni príncipe que hubiera sabido ver un significado tan rico como el que él veía en la función de mecenas de las artes. En realidad, estaba avergonzado de aquellos príncipes y papas, cuando no le inspiraban cierto temor, e incluso jamás se había comportado tan cautelosa y sigilosamente como al considerar, después de una somera lectura de Hermann Grimm, el lugar en que Julio II y León X quedaban «situados», debido al tratamiento que dieron a Miguel Ángel. Sí, en un lugar muy inferior al del vulgar ciudadano norteamericano, por lo menos en caso de que éste no fuera tan vulgar que no pudiera ser Adam Verver. Además, bien podemos estimar que los resultados de semejantes comparaciones, después de haber acudido a la mente de nuestro amigo, sin duda alguna se quedaron en ella. Y ¿qué podía hacer su libertad de ver, de la que dichas comparaciones formaban parte, sino aumentar y aumentar?

Y esa libertad quizá llegó incluso a ser tan grande que para él representaba todas las libertades, ya que, por ejemplo, esta libertad estaba presente íntegramente en los mismísimos momentos en que la señora Rance conspiraba contra él, en Fawns, aquella mañana dominical en la sala de billar, un hecho alrededor del cual quizá hayamos trazado un círculo excesivamente amplio. La señora Rance dominaba prácticamente todas las licencias del presente y del futuro inmediato: la licencia de pasar aquellos momentos como el señor Verver habría querido; la licencia de dejar de recordar durante unos momentos que, si le proponían contraer matrimonio —fuese la presente aspirante, fuese cualquier otra—, no se portaría como un insensato, aunque la demostración de su prudencia comportaría cierta crueldad; la licencia, principalmente, para pasar de las cartas a los periódicos y aislarse y orientarse de nuevo mediante el sonido, durante aquel intervalo por él conquistado y emitido por el monstruo de múltiples bocas, el ejercicio de cuyos pulmones el señor Verver estimulaba incesantemente. La señora Rance se quedó en su compañía hasta que los demás regresaron de la iglesia. En ese momento se advirtió más claramente que en cualquier momento anterior que la tortura del señor Verver, cuando comenzara, sería realmente desagradable en grado sumo. La impresión que la actitud de la señora Rance produjo en él —y esto era lo importante— consistía no tanto en que ella quisiera poner de relieve sus méritos cuanto en que resultaba más convincente de lo que ella misma suponía, es decir, la señora Rance simbolizaba, de manera virtualmente inconsciente, la especial deficiencia del señor Verver, su desdichada carencia de una esposa a la que encomendar soluciones. Las contingencias a las que aplicar esas soluciones, contingencias que la señora Rance le invitaba a pensar que quizá algún día

le asaltarían por todas partes, no eran de aquella clase que le permitiese a uno enfrentarse a ellas. La posibilidad de que tales contingencias se produjeran, cuando la visitante del señor Verver dijo o expresó con igual claridad aunque sin decirlo: «Como puede usted comprender, me veo refrenada por el señor Rance y porque soy orgullosa y refinada, pero ¡ay, si no fuera por el señor Rance, por mi orgullo y por mi refinamiento!»; la posibilidad de que tales contingencias se produjeran, decía, se transformó en un murmullo multitudinario de tal volumen que era capaz de llenar todo su futuro; murmullo de enaguas, de perfumadas cartas con muchas hojas, de voces en las que, a pesar de que se distinguieran las unas de las otras, importaba muy poco en qué parte del resonante país habían aprendido a prevalecer. Los Assingham y las señoritas Lutche se habían alejado por el sendero que llevaba, a través del parque, a la pequeña y antigua iglesia, «en la propiedad» que nuestro amigo a menudo se descubría a sí mismo en trance de poder transportar, tal como ahora el edificio se encontraba, con toda su sencilla dulzura, en una caja de vidrio, a una de sus salas de exposición. Mientras tanto Maggie había inducido a su marido, hombre no muy dado a estas prácticas, a hacer con ella en coche la peregrinación un tanto más larga al más cercano altar, ciertamente modesto, de la fe de Maggie, que era la misma que la de su madre, y que también era la que el señor Verver siempre había deseado vagamente se supusiera que era también la suya, sin cuya sólida facilidad, que daba firmeza y suavidad al escenario, el drama del matrimonio de Maggie no hubiera podido ser representado.

Sin embargo, lo que por fin parece que ocurrió fue que los dos grupos regresaron en el mismo momento, coincidieron junto a la casa y, luego, formando un solo grupo, sus individuos anduvieron juntos de habitación desierta en habitación desierta buscando, al azar, a la pareja que habían dejado en casa. Esta búsqueda los llevó a la puerta de la sala de billar; la aparición de los recién llegados, cuando la puerta se abrió dándoles entrada, motivó que Adam Verver tuviera, de la forma más extraña del mundo, una nueva y penetrante sensación. Fue realmente notable. Dicha sensación se abrió allí mismo, como una flor, como una extrañísima flor pueda abrirse súbitamente al impulso de un soplo de brisa. El soplo se hallaba, con carácter muy principal, en la expresión de los ojos de la hija del señor Verver, con la que comprendió con toda exactitud lo que había ocurrido en su ausencia: la persecución de que la señora Rance había hecho objeto a su padre hasta aquella remota estancia, el espíritu y la manera, perfectamente característica, con que el señor Verver había aceptado aquella complicación. En resumen, la expresión de Maggie llevaba el sello inconfundible de una de sus ansiedades. Cierto es que esta ansiedad parecía compartida separadamente por otras personas, ya que el rostro de Fanny Assingham no tenía en aquel instante una expresión impenetrable para el señor Verver, y en los cuatro hermosos ojos de las señoritas Lutche brillaba una extraña luz de color harto afín. Todos los que entraron, exceptuando al Príncipe y al coronel, a quienes el asunto no les interesaba, y que ni siquiera se daban cuenta de que interesaba a los restantes miembros del grupo, sabían algo o, por lo menos, tenían su particular idea al respecto; consistía la idea precisamente en que esto era lo que la señora Rance se había propuesto hacer, a cuyo fin había buscado arteramente la oportunidad más propicia. El especial matiz de la sorpresa en el caso de las señoritas Lutche podía muy bien incluso insinuar el asombro de una energía hegemónicamente ejercida. Realmente, la posición de las señoritas Lutche resultaba graciosa a poco que se piense en ello. Habían traído consigo y habían presentado, con toda inocencia, a la señora Rance, debido sin la menor duda a que el señor Rance se había separado literalmente de su vista. Y ahora resultaba que aquel ramo de flores que habían regalado al dueño de la casa —la señora Rance era un verdadero regalito— había sido el vehículo en el que habían transportado a una peligrosa víbora. El señor Verver casi palpaba en el aire la acusación formulada por las señoritas Lutche; y esta acusación era tan marcada que incluso la dignidad del propio señor Verver quedaba en entredicho.

Sin embargo, esto fue sólo una pincelada en el cuadro, ya que lo verdaderamente importante, como he insinuado, fue la muda comunicación con Maggie. Sólo la angustia de su hija era profunda, y el señor Verver la percibió con mayor fuerza por ser nueva. ¿En qué momento, en el pasado que habían compartido, Maggie había revelado temor, aunque fuera en silencio, por el modo de vivir del señor Verver? Habían compartido temores, como habían compartido alegrías, pero los temores de Maggie se habían centrado en lo que afectaba por igual a los dos. Y he aquí que, de repente, se planteaba una cuestión que sólo al señor Verver afectaba, y esa insonora explosión marcó una época. El señor Verver estaba en la mente de Maggie y, en cierta manera, estaba también en sus manos, lo cual era muy distinto a estar donde siempre había estado, sencillamente, en lo más hondo de su corazón y en lo más hondo de su vida, a tal profundidad que no podía quedar separado de ella, quedar en contraste o en oposición con ella; en resumen, no era un objeto o ser distinto. Pero el paso del tiempo lo había logrado al fin. Su relación había quedado alterada. El señor

Verver vio de nuevo esa diferencia expresada en el rostro de Maggie. También la sintió en su persona, ya que no se trataba simplemente de señora Rance más o señora Rance menos. También para Maggie, súbita y casi beneficiosamente, la señora Rance pasó de ser una presencia incómoda a ser una revelación. Al contraer matrimonio, habían dejado vacío el territorio que el señor Verver tenía inmediatamente al frente, o sea su personal recinto, ya que ellos eran el Príncipe y la Princesa. Ante el señor Verver habían dejado espacio libre para que otros pudieran ocuparlo, y los otros ya se habían dado cuenta. También el señor Verver no sólo vio lo que Maggie veía sino también lo que Maggie veía que él veía. Debemos añadir que esto hubiera sido su más intensa percepción, si al momento no se hubiera fijado en Fanny Assingham. El rostro de ésta no podía ocultarle lo que se albergaba en su mente. A su manera, Fanny Assingham había visto lo que los dos, Maggie y su padre, estaban viendo.

Capítulo IX

Tanta muda comunicación fue durante aquellos momentos maravillosa; quizá debamos confesar que hemos visto prematuramente en esta escena una crisis que tardó mucho más en producirse. La tranquila hora de recíproca compañía de que padre e hija gozaron aquella tarde, estuvo realmente centrada en las sensaciones que tuvieron cada uno de ellos por el tratamiento que recibían de quienes habían ido a la iglesia y en pocas cosas más. No se produjo entre ellos ninguna alusión, ninguna insistencia antes del almuerzo ni inmediatamente después, a no ser que el hecho de no haberse reunido con la prontitud acostumbrada estuviera cargado de significado. Por espacio de una o dos horas después del almuerzo —y los domingos con especial puntualidad, por una razón doméstica que Maggie debía tener en cuenta— la Princesa se encontraba habitualmente en compañía de su hijo, en cuyas habitaciones a menudo encontraba ya instalado al señor Verver, o tarde o temprano recibía su visita. Las visitas del señor Verver a su nieto tenían lugar en cualquier momento del día: nada ni nadie podía impedírselo; también debemos tener en cuenta que no pocas veces era el niño quien visitaba a su abuelo, a horas no previstas, sin olvidar que la Princesa y su padre pasaban juntos unos «ratitos», como éste decía, siempre que podían. Eran éstos verdaderos momentos de comunión que casi siempre se producían en la terraza, en los jardines o en el parque, mientras el Principino tomaba el aire con mucha pompa y circunstancia de sombrilla, cochecito y velos de encaje, más la incorruptible vigilancia femenina. Las habitaciones privadas del Principino ocupaban en aquella gran mansión la mayor parte de un ala y no eran mucho más accesibles que si la mansión hubiera sido un palacio real, y el niño, el príncipe heredero. En aquel *sancta sanctorum* de la infancia, en el tiempo a que nos referimos y en los períodos mencionados, la conversación estaba siempre tan centrada en el ser que con su presencia dominaba el escenario, o en temas con él relacionados, que los restantes intereses o motivos de conversación habían aprendido a conformarse con el ligero e insuficiente tratamiento que allí se les daba. En el mejor de los casos, salían a colación sólo en lo que afectaban al futuro del niño, a su pasado o a su presente, y jamás tenían grandes oportunidades de hacer valer sus méritos, ni de quejarse del olvido en que se los tenía. En verdad, esta unida participación quizá fuera lo que mayormente contribuyó a confirmar en los adultos que intervenían en la escena la sensación, con respecto a Adam Verver, de una vida no sólo no interrumpida, sino también más profundamente asociada, más ampliamente combinada, a la que hemos hecho referencia, en cierta medida. Desde luego, asunto viejo e idea harto conocida es el que un hermoso niño constituya un nuevo vínculo entre marido y mujer, pero Maggie y su padre habían conseguido con sumo ingenio transformar a la preciosa criatura en un vínculo entre su mamá y su abuelito. El Principino, acaso espectador de este proceso, hubiera podido convertirse, con un solo paso más a lo largo de esa senda, en un desdichado huérfano, con el lugar del más inmediato pariente varón vacío y expedito para que lo ocupara el más próximo afecto.

En consecuencia, los unidos concelebrantes del culto de adoración al niño no tenían ocasión de hablar de lo que el Príncipe podía hacer y podía no hacer en beneficio de su hijo, por cuanto en su ausencia la suma de servicios quedaba totalmente cumplida. Además, de ninguna manera cabía decir que se dudara del Príncipe, por cuanto era conspicuamente adicto a acariciar al niño, al modo italiano, en los momentos en que lo consideraba discreto, habida cuenta de ajenas reivindicaciones de este derecho. Sí, conspicuamente, para Maggie; ésta, en términos generales, tenía más ocasiones de hablar con su marido de los excesos de

efusión de su padre que con éste de los excesos de efusión de su marido. En lo tocante al tema de que hablamos, Adam Verver se comportaba con peculiar serenidad. Estaba seguro de la admiración auxiliar de su yerno, admiración hacia su nieto, naturalmente, pues para empezar, ¿qué otra cosa sino el instinto —o quizá la tradición— había sido la causa de que engendrara a un niño tan bello que por la fuerza tuviera que ser objeto de admiración? Sin embargo, lo que mayormente contribuía a la armonía de este juego de relaciones era la manera en que el joven Príncipe parecía dar a entender que, tradición por tradición, la del abuelo del niño, cualquiera que fuese el criterio de estimación, no había sido estéril ni mucho menos. Se trataba de una tradición que, fuera de lo que fuera, había florecido precursoramente en la Princesa, lo cual Americo daba a entender con sus delicadezas. El comportamiento del Príncipe con respecto a su heredero no era más anguloso que su comportamiento general. De ninguna fuente recibía el señor Verver, quizá, tan clara impresión de ser para él aquello un extraño e importante fenómeno, como de la constituida por la impunidad de su apropiación, por aquellas horas no disputadas en las habitaciones del niño. Parecía que las demostraciones especiales del abuelo, como tal, fueran otra faceta que el observador debiera estudiar u otro hecho en que el propio abuelo debiera reparar. Nuestro personaje sabía que todo ello estaba unido a una anterior percepción suya: la incapacidad del Príncipe de concluir las materias que hicieran referencia a él. Era preciso demostrarle al Príncipe, en cada momento diferente de un proceso, la razón de tal o cual comportamiento. Ahora bien, llevada a efecto la demostración, el Príncipe aceptaba admirablemente el resultado. A fin de cuentas, esto era lo más importante. El pobre Príncipe procuraba realmente ser aceptado, al procurar constantemente comprender. A poco que lo pensemos, ¿cómo se puede saber que un caballo no se asustará ante una banda musical, en la calle de un pueblo, porque no se asustó ante una máquina de tren? Puede muy bien ser que el caballo se haya acostumbrado a las locomotoras y no a las bandas musicales. De esta manera, al paso de los meses, el Príncipe se fue enterando poco a poco de aquello a que el padre de su esposa se había acostumbrado. Sí, se había acostumbrado a la romántica contemplación del Principino. ¿Quién lo hubiera dicho, y en qué pararía todo ello? El único temor de cierta importancia que experimentaba el señor Verver era el temor de defraudar al Príncipe por sus rarezas. Éste estimaba que, desde este punto de vista, el señor Verver se comportaba de manera harto razonable. No sabía —estaba aprendiendo y esto le divertía— a cuántas cosas realmente estaba acostumbrado el señor Verver. ¡Ah, si el Príncipe pudiera descubrir alguna a la que el señor Verver no lo estuviera! En su opinión, esto no alteraría la suave armonía de sus relaciones con el señor Verver y, además, bien cabía la posibilidad de que les diera mayor interés.

De todas maneras, lo que ahora padre e hija vieron con claridad fue sencillamente que sabían lo que deseaban por el momento: que querían estar juntos, a toda costa, pasara lo que pasara, y esta necesidad tanto les acució que les indujo a salir de la casa por un lugar oculto del sitio en que sus amigos se habían reunido, y pasear sin ser vistos, sin ser seguidos, a lo largo de una senda cubierta por las copas de los árboles que cruzaban el jardín «viejo». Lo llamaban así, y era viejo con esa antigüedad que adquieren las realidades formalizadas, con altos bojes, con tejos y la extensión de un muro de ladrillos que había adquirido tonos purpúreos y rosáceos. Salieron por una puerta de dicho muro que ostentaba una placa con la fecha de 1713 en una inscripción antigua; luego, tuvieron ante sí una pequeña portezuela blanca, intensamente blanca y limpia entre el verdor, la cruzaron y penetraron poco a poco en el lugar en que los altos árboles se apiñaban espaciosamente, que era donde encontrarían uno de los puntos más recoletos. Hacía tiempo que habían colocado un banco bajo la copa de un roble que contribuía a coronar un pequeño montículo; detrás de él el terreno descendía y se alzaba de nuevo a una distancia suficiente para proteger la soledad y permitir la visión de un horizonte boscoso. La bendición del verano estaba aún con ellos, el sol vertía su luz en aquellos lugares en que traspasaba el follaje menos denso. Maggie, dispuesta a salir, había cogido una sombrilla que, sobre su encantadora cabeza descubierta, tal como la sostenía, juntamente con el gran sombrero pajizo que su padre llevaba siempre muy echado hacia atrás, daba definida intención a su paseo. Conocían el banco. Estaba «reservado». Esta palabra les gustaba, y bendecían el banco por gozar de semejante condición. Después de haber comenzado a reposar allí, hubiesen sonreído (si no hubieran sido tan serios y si el asunto no hubiera dejado muy pronto de tener importancia), al pensar en la probable curiosidad que los demás sentirían respecto a su paradero.

¿Y qué revelaba lo mucho que los dos gozaban de su indiferencia ante cualquier juicio que su olvido de la ceremonia provocara, sino que tenían muy en cuenta a los demás? Cada uno de ellos sabía que los dos rebosaban superstición por no «ofender», pero bien hubieran podido preguntarse a sí mismos, o preguntarse el uno al otro, si acaso esto iba a ser, a fin de cuentas, la última y definitiva palabra del ejercicio de su

conciencia. Era cierto de todas maneras que, además de los Assingham, las Lutche y la señora Rance, podía darse el caso de que asistieran a la reunión del té que se celebraba en lugar adecuado en la terraza occidental las cuatro o cinco personas —entre ellas la muy linda y típicamente irlandesa señorita Maddock, invitada, anunciada y al fin incorporada— de las dos o tres casas relativamente cercanas; una de estas casas era la residencia del propietario de la mansión arrendada por el señor Verver, un propietario que vivía humildemente contemplando desde lejos su mansión ancestral, que ahora le reportaba beneficios. No menos cierto era también que, en alguna medida, los miembros del grupo en cuestión tendrían que aceptar la ausencia de los Verver, de una manera u otra. En este asunto siempre cabía confiar, empero, en que Fanny Assingham, en caso de peligro, defendiera la reputación de los buenos amigos del señor Verver y de su hija, y también cabía confiar en ella a los efectos de justificar su ausencia ante Americo, caso de que éste diera muestras de su expresiva ansiedad italiana. Americo, como a la Princesa le constaba sobradamente, siempre se doblegaba con facilidad a las explicaciones, artimañas y afirmaciones de la señora Assingham, y en realidad quizá viviera pendiente de ellas, mientras su nueva vida —tal era el nombre que le daba— iba desarrollándose. Maggie no guardaba en secreto, ni mucho menos —incluso constituía una broma que hacía entre sus amigos—, que ella era incapaz de dar las explicaciones que la señora Assingham daba satisfaciendo con ello el capricho del Príncipe, a quien las explicaciones gustaban hasta el punto que parecía coleccionarlas como si se tratara de grabados o de sellos de correos. El Príncipe no causaba la impresión, por el momento, de que quisiera esas explicaciones con el fin de utilizarlas, sino más bien como ornamento o diversión, diversión inocente que le gustaba en grado sumo y que resultaba característica de una hermosa, bendita y, por lo general, un tanto indolente carencia de gustos más refinados e incluso más sofisticados.

De todas maneras, debiérase a lo que se debiera, la buena mujer había llegado a un punto en el que franca y alegremente se reconocía —y ella era la primera en reconocerlo— que ejercía en el reducido círculo íntimo una función que no siempre era una sinecura. Casi parecía que hubiera asumido, con el amable y melancólico coronel siguiéndole los pasos, un compromiso de responsabilidad consistente en estar siempre disponible para dar respuestas a las llamadas y peticiones que surgían en el curso de las conversaciones y, también sin la menor duda, a consecuencia del ocio. La posición que la señora Assingham ocupaba en aquel hogar constituía el motivo más que suficiente con frecuencia tanto de su presencia, como de las visitas, hechas juntamente con su marido, pródigamente repetidas y largamente prolongadas, que en ocasiones revestían la forma de protesta de amistad. La señora Assingham estaba allí para que el Príncipe no sufriera inquietudes, y ésta era la manera en que aquél explicaba la influencia que en él ejercía dicha señora; sólo faltaba una más visible predisposición a la inquietud en el Príncipe, para que esta explicación fuera perfectamente ajustada. Fanny quitaba importancia a su función, casi la ridiculizaba, hasta solía afirmar que no hacía falta carcelero alguno para guardar a un corderito domesticado, adornado con cintas de color de rosa. Semejante animalillo no exigía que se le dominara, sino sólo que se le educara. En consecuencia, la señora Assingham reconocía que era una educadora, en tanto que Maggie tenía plena conciencia de que irremediablemente ella no lo era. De esta manera llegó a ser una auténtica realidad el que la señora Assingham quedara encargada solamente de la inteligencia del Príncipe. Huelga decir que esto dejaba a Maggie encargada de gran número de funciones diferentes a la anterior, en el caso de aquel ser adornado con tantas cintas de color de rosa, dicho sea simbólicamente. De todos modos, lo que acabamos de decir venía a significar, en el caso que nos ocupa, que la señora Assingham se encargaba de mantener tranquilo al Príncipe, mientras su esposa y su suegro efectuaban su modesta y parca salida al campo. Sin duda la misión de la señora Assingham era tan necesaria en opinión de los miembros del grupo allí presentes como en opinión de aquellos otros dos que estaban ausentes, casi por vez primera. A Maggie le constaba que su esposo, el Príncipe, podía soportar, cuando ella se encontraba con él, el raro comportamiento de aquellos extraños tipos ingleses que le aburrían indeciblemente, debido a lo muy poco que se parecían a él; éste era uno de los casos en que la esposa del Príncipe se constituía en su verdadero amparo. Pero ella estaba igualmente segura de que era incapaz de imaginar al Príncipe afrontando en su ausencia dicho problema. ¿Cómo se comportaría y cómo hablaría y, sobre todo, qué aspecto tendría —él, que con su noble y hermoso rostro tan maravillosos aspectos podía tener—, en caso de que se le dejara solo en compañía de algunos de aquellos sujetos que tanto le desorientaban? Entre sus vecinos no faltaban individuos de esa clase, pero Maggie tenía la extraña reacción —que en manera alguna irritaba al Príncipe — de sentir hacia ellos una simpatía proporcional a su rareza. Al Príncipe le gustaba decir que el amor de Maggie por las *chinoiseries* tenía carácter hereditario. Pero en la tarde a que nos referimos Maggie no se

sentía preocupada por el Príncipe, pensaba que más valía que su marido se las arreglara como pudiera en el trato con dicha gente.

Si ocurrían casos como éste con más frecuencia, Maggie podía recurrir a la impresión que le causaron ciertas palabras dichas por la señora Assingham, referentes precisamente a aquellas ansias de explicaciones que Americo tenía, y a las que nos hemos referido hace poco. No era que la Princesa tuviera que agradecer a otra persona, aunque ésta fuera tan inteligente como su amiga, haberle revelado algo referente a su marido que ella no habría podido averiguar por sí misma. Pero, hasta el presente, había estado siempre predispuesta a aceptar con modesta gratitud las palabras que explicaban mejor de lo que ella era capaz de explicar una verdad por ella sabida. Por esto podía actuar a la luz de un hecho lúcidamente expresado por aquella amiga que era el común apoyo de los cónyuges; el hecho consistía en que el Príncipe estaba atesorando, guardando, con una finalidad misteriosa y muy noble, que algún día saldría a la luz, toda la sabiduría dimanante de las respuestas a sus preguntas, todas las generalizaciones, todas las impresiones que se iba formando. Las apartaba y las guardaba porque quería que su gran cañón estuviera bien cargado el día en que decidiera dispararlo. En primer lugar, el Príncipe quería conocer globalmente y con toda seguridad el tema que se estaba desarrollando ante su vista. Después de esto, los hechos innumerables que hubiera atesorado encontrarían el uso oportuno. Él sabía muy bien lo que quería, por lo que se podía tener la seguridad de que, en su momento, y con una u otra finalidad, produciría la gran sorpresa. La señora Assingham había repetido que el Príncipe sabía lo que quería, y esta feliz seguridad había quedado arraigada en Maggie. Siempre podía recordar que el Príncipe sabía lo que quería. En algunos momentos causaba una impresión de vaguedad, de estar ausente, de sentirse aburrido incluso. Pero cuando no se encontraba en presencia del padre de Maggie, ante quien le era imposible adoptar otra actitud que no fuera la de estar respetuosamente atento, daba muestras de su innato carácter alegre, tarareando canciones e incluso emitiendo caprichosos sonidos carentes de sentido que expresaban un sentimiento de íntima liberación, o eran fantásticamente lastimeros. A veces había reflexiones de la más franca lucidez acerca de las circunstancias que durante mucho tiempo no podrían modificarse en absoluto, en las que se encontraban lo que le quedaba de su verdadero patrimonio allá en su patria; acerca del principal objeto de sus afectos, la casa de Roma, el gran palacio negro, el *Palazzo Nero*, como le gustaba llamarlo; también acerca de la villa en los montes Sabinos, que Maggie había visto durante su noviazgo, y que tanto había deseado poseer; acerca del Castello propiamente dicho, cabeza visible del principado, que el Príncipe calificaba siempre de «encaramado», y que Maggie sabía que estaba sobre el pedestal formado por la montaña, y bellamente matizado de azul si se contemplaba desde lejos. En ocasiones, cuando el Príncipe se hallaba en determinado estado de humor, se solazaba pensando en la alienada condición de estas propiedades, que no cabía considerar irremediablemente irrecuperables, aun sometidas a interminables arrendamientos y cargas, con obstinados ocupantes, sin posibilidades de utilización, por no hablar ya de la nube de hipotecas que, desde largo tiempo atrás, las habían enterrado bajo las cenizas de la rabia y del resentimiento, formando una capa tan gruesa como aquella que otrora cubrió los pueblos al pie del Vesubio, de manera que actualmente todo intento de recuperación de dichas propiedades constituía un proceso muy parecido al de una excavación.

Pero con el cambio de humor, el Príncipe casi gemía al recordar estos esplendentes lugares de su paraíso perdido, y se calificaba de idiota por no ser capaz de hacer los sacrificios precisos para recuperarlos, sacrificios que, caso de hacerse, correrían a cargo del señor Verver.

Entre tanto, una de las realidades más amables que se daban entre marido y mujer, una de esas fáciles certidumbres que les permitían reaccionar alegremente, radicaba en que Maggie jamás admiraba tanto a Americo, o jamás le parecía tan conmovedoramente hermoso, inteligente e irresistible, en la medida en que fatalmente así le había parecido desde un principio, como en los momentos en que veía a otras mujeres reducidas a una pasiva pulpa, y desde entonces comenzó a ser la sustancia que nutría a Maggie. En realidad, de nada hablaban con más íntima y familiar complacencia como de esa licencia y ese privilegio, de ese feliz margen sin límites recíprocamente concebido; Maggie llegaba hasta el punto de afirmar que, si algún día Americo se emborrachara y le diera una paliza, el espectáculo de Americo en compañía de odiadas rivales, cualquiera que fuese el extremo al que antes hubiera llegado, bastaría para que ella le perdonara, sólo por el soberano encanto de ese espectáculo, del encanto en sí mismo y el de aquella exhibición del Príncipe que tan profundamente conmovía a la Princesa. En consecuencia, ¿por qué no había de utilizar recurso tan abierto a sus posibilidades, para conseguir que la Princesa siguiera enamorada de él? En aquellos alegres momentos, el Príncipe reconocía de todo corazón que su actuación a este respecto pocas dificultades le planteaba, pues, por ser hombre de sencillas ideas en lo tocante a este tema —¿y por qué iba

a avergonzarse de ello?—, solamente de una manera sabía tratar a las bellas. Sí, tenían que ser bellas y en esta materia era exigente, de gustos peculiares y pedía mucho. Pero, cuando estos requisitos quedaban cumplidos, ¿qué relación era la única concebible?, ¿qué relación era la única decente, básica y propiamente humana, sino la del puro y simple interés por su belleza? La Princesa siempre decía que dicho interés no era «simple» y que la simpleza poca relación guardaba con aquel asunto, considerado globalmente, sino que, por el contrario, destacaba por la riqueza de sus variados matices. De todas maneras, había quedado firmemente sentada la base de la actuación del Príncipe, y todas las señoritas Maddock del mundo podían estar seguras de que serían importantes para el Príncipe. Más de una vez Maggie había llamado a su padre para hacerle partícipe de tan graciosa situación: lo muy seguras, cómodamente seguras, que podían estar dichas señoritas. Y así fue como con la ternura de su carácter de vez en cuando proporcionaba un poco de felicidad a su padre por el medio de hacerle alguna que otra confidencia íntima. Ésta era una de las normas de Maggie, quien abundaba en pequeñas normas, consideraciones y previsiones. Desde luego, había cosas que no podía decirle directamente a su padre, cosas referentes a Americo y a ella, referentes a su felicidad, a su unión y a sus más profundos sentimientos; también había cosas que no hacía falta que dijera, pero no faltaban otras que eran verdaderas y divertidas, comunicables y reales, y de éstas Maggie podía sacar provecho dentro de sus normas, conscientes y delicadamente cultivadas, de comportamiento filial.

Un agradable silencio había envuelto la mayoría de estos temas, mientras Maggie se encontraba a solas con su padre. Esta serenidad comportaba innumerables reconocimientos completos. Aquel ordenado y espléndido reposo, teniendo a su alrededor todos los indicios de una confianza sólidamente basada, habría representado, para personas de inferior temple espiritual, la insolencia del abandono. Pero no, ellos no se comportaban con insolencia —los dos lo sabían— sino con beatífica, agradecida y personal modestia, sin estar avergonzados de saber con competencia cuándo una cosa grande era grande, cuándo una cosa buena era buena, cuándo una cosa segura era segura; esto comportaba que las cosas no quedaran situadas fuera de su dicha por timidez, lo cual habría sido tan lamentable como si quedaran fuera de su dicha por descaro. Merecedores como eran de esta dicha, sometido cada uno de ellos a nuestro último análisis, parecían desear que el otro se considerara como tal. Lo que sus personas emanaban con carácter más definitorio, comunicándolo al aire de la tarde cuando sus miradas se encontraban plácidamente, bien pudiera ser una especie de desamparo en su felicidad. Su honradez, la justificación de todo, estaba con ellos acompañándolos, pero quizá habían estado preguntando, un tanto a ciegas, qué ulterior empleo podían dar a algo tan perfecto. Habían creado, alimentado y solidificado aquella honradez, la habían alojado allí con dignidad y la habían coronado de comodidad, pero ¿no cabía la posibilidad de que aquel momento representara para ellos —o para nosotros, mientras los contemplamos ante su destino— el alborear del descubrimiento de que ser honrado no basta para solucionar todos los problemas? De lo contrario, ¿cómo hubiera sido posible que Maggie sintiera que palabras claramente dudosas —la expresión del penoso desagrado experimentado pocas horas antes— ascendieran al cabo de un rato a sus labios? Además Maggie daba tan por supuesto que su padre era conocedor de sus dudas, que la vaguedad de sus palabras bastó para expresar cuanto quería decir:

—A fin de cuentas, ¿qué es lo que quieren de ti?

La Princesa se había referido a aquellas amenazadoras fuerzas cuyo símbolo era la señora Rance; y su padre, limitándose a sonreír, sin que se alterase su tranquilidad, no se tomó la molestia de fingir ignorar a qué se refería Maggie. Lo que quería decir quedaría perfectamente definido tan pronto como ella hablara, pero, cuando llegara el momento de concretar, nada podría servir de base para organizar una gran campaña defensiva. Las aguas de la conversación se extendieron un poco más, y Maggie aportó una idea cuando dijo:

—En realidad, lo que ocurre es que para nosotros las proporciones han quedado alteradas.

El señor Verver aceptó, por el momento, esta observación un tanto sibilina, y ni siquiera pidió aclaraciones a su hija cuando ésta añadió que todo tendría una importancia mucho menor si él no fuera tan terriblemente joven. El señor Verver se limitó a emitir un sonido de protesta cuando ella declaró que, en su calidad de hija, por elementales razones de decencia, hubiera debido esperar. Pero poco después Maggie ya reconocía que, caso de esperar, debería esperar largo tiempo, si quería aguardar a que su padre fuera viejo. Pero había una solución:

—Como sea que realmente eres un irresistible jovenzuelo, tenemos que enfrentarnos con ello, esto es lo que esa mujer me ha inducido a pensar. Porque, luego, vendrán otras.

Capítulo X

Hablar de este asunto de esta manera produjo al fin una sensación de alivio al señor Verver.

—Sí, vendrán otras, pero tú me sacarás del atolladero.

Maggie dudó:

—¿Quieres decir que te sacaré del atolladero en caso de que tú cedas?

—¡Oh, no! Quiero decir que me ayudarás a salir del trance sin ceder.

Maggie volvió a guardar silencio durante un rato. Cuando habló, hubo en sus palabras cierta brusquedad:

—¿Y por qué has de resistirte siempre?

Ni siquiera estas palabras le sobresaltaron, por la costumbre que tenía de aceptar todo, absolutamente todo lo que procediera de Maggie, como armonioso. Sin embargo, también cabía advertir, por manifestarlo en toda su persona, que resistirse no podía ser su actitud natural o adquirida por obra y gracia de la costumbre. Las apariencias del señor Verver daban testimonio de que quizá tuviera que resistir largo tiempo, un tiempo relativamente largo habida cuenta de que era hombre harto asediado. Estas apariencias en modo alguno traían a la mente la idea de pocas facultades y rudeza de los sentidos, a pesar de que el señor Verver era hombre menudo, flaco, con aspecto algo rancio y carente de la general prerrogativa de la buena presencia. No sería por la masa, el peso o la vulgar cantidad física por lo que el señor Verver insistiría, resistiría o prevalecería en el futuro, como tampoco lo había hecho en el pasado. En él había algo que transformaba su posición en todas las ocasiones, que llevaba su relación social o de grupo en escena al fondo del escenario, había en él una casi visible carencia consciente de afinidad con las candilejas. Lo que menos le hubiera gustado ser era director de escena o el autor de la obra, porque se encuentra siempre en primer término. En el mejor de los casos, hubiera sido el hombre que financia el espectáculo, el que vigila sus intereses entre bambalinas, aun cuando confesara su ignorancia en lo tocante al arte escénico. Sólo un poco más alto que su hija, jamás se amparaba en los derechos de su presunta superior corpulencia. Ya en su juventud había perdido gran parte de su cabello crespo y rizado, que encontraba su réplica en una barbita recortada, tan recortada que apenas cabía calificar de barba completa, que llevaba a modo de detalle personal para suplir la falta de uno característico en los labios, las mejillas o el mentón. Su cara descolorida y de limpios trazos estaba dotada de los rasgos meramente indispensables, sugería inmediatamente, a efectos de calificarla, la palabra «clara» y, dentro de esta calificación, traía a la mente la idea de un cuarto pequeño y decente, bien barrido, sin el engorro de mobiliario y con la ventaja, como ahora podía advertirse, de la perspectiva que se divisaba desde sus dos amplias ventanas sin cortinas. Los ojos de Adam Verver causaban la impresión de dar entrada por igual a la mañana y a la noche, en insólitas magnitudes, lo cual confería a la modesta zona de aquel cuarto una proyección externa «grande», incluso cuando sólo había estrellas en el exterior. Aquellos ojos eran profundamente azules, de un azul siempre cambiante, y, a pesar de no ser románticos, resultaban juveniles y casi extrañamente bellos, dotados de una ambigüedad que impedía a uno saber a ciencia cierta si lo que expresaban principalmente era la visión de su poseedor o si se abrían a la visión externa. Fuera lo que fuese lo que uno pensara, aquellos ojos infundían carácter a la cara, de manera que, se encontrara uno donde se encontrara jamás quedaba fuera de su alcance, y se movían en busca de comunidad o de oportunidad, y sin poder saber con certeza de qué se trataba, por

cuanto el objeto tanto podía estar ante ellos como detrás de ellos. Para no extendernos excesivamente, diremos que los otros rasgos de su persona también eran en todo atenuados; su característica menos acallada radicaba en su atuendo, adoptado de una vez para siempre, con cierta especie de criterio revelador de algo parecido a los escrúpulos suntuarios. Todos los días del año, fuera cual fuese la ocasión, el señor Verver llevaba una chaqueta negra, de chaqué, corta, a la moda de sus tiempos juveniles, pantalones de fresco aspecto, a cuadros blancos y negros, con cuyas prendas estimaba invariablemente el señor Verver que armonizaba una corbata de seda azul. Sobre su abultado estómago, con rara indiferencia a climas y estaciones, llevaba un chaleco blanco cruzado.

El señor Verver preguntó:

—¿De verdad que te gustaría que me casara?

Hablaba como si semejante idea, por provenir de su hija, fuera realmente digna de consideración, hasta el punto de que, si su contestación era afirmativa, se mostraría dispuesto a ponerla en práctica.

Sin embargo, Maggie todavía no se hallaba en situación de dar su parecer de un modo tajante, aun cuando, mientras lo pensaba, acudía claramente a su mente una verdad relacionada con lo anterior.

—Lo que pienso es que antes había algo que era bueno y que yo, no sé cómo, he transformado en malo. Era bueno el que no te hubieras vuelto a casar y el que no causaras la impresión de querer casarte de nuevo.

Después de una pausa, prosiguió:

—También parecía natural que el problema de volver a casarte no se planteara. Esto es lo que yo he alterado. El problema se plantea y se planteará.

En tono de alegre duda, el señor Verver preguntó:

—¿Crees que no podré soslayar el problema?

—Bueno, lo que quiero decir es que, con mi actuación, te he creado la necesidad de tener que soslayarlo.

Le gustó la ternura que estas palabras entrañaban, lo cual le indujo a pasar el brazo por la cintura de su hija, sentada a su lado:

—La verdad es que no tengo la impresión de que te hayas alejado mucho de mí. Es algo así como si te hubieras mudado a la casa contigua a la mía.

—No considero justo haberte dado un empujón y dejarte ahí, en el sitio en que mi empujón te ha dejado. He cambiado la situación y debo pensar en el cambio.

En tono benévolo, el señor Verver preguntó:

—¿Y qué es lo que piensas?

—Eso es, precisamente, lo que todavía no sé. Debo descubrirlo. Tenemos que pensar juntos, que es lo que siempre hemos hecho.

Después de otro momento de silenciosa meditación, Maggie prosiguió:

—Ahora me doy cuenta de que, por lo menos, hubiera debido ofrecerte una alternativa. Sí, hubiera debido encontrarla.

—¿Una alternativa a qué?

—A quedarte sin lo que has perdido sin hacer nada para remediarlo.

—¿Y qué he perdido?

Maggie pensó durante unos momentos, como si tuviera dificultades en expresarlo, a pesar de verlo claramente:

—Aquello, fuera lo que fuese, que antes era causa de que no pensáramos en lo que ahora estamos pensando, y que, como tú dirías, te mantenía fuera del mercado. Parecía que tú no pudieras estar en el mercado mientras seguías casado conmigo. 0 mejor dicho, parecía que yo, al estar casada contigo, mantuviera inocentemente a la gente fuera del mercado. Ahora me he casado con otra persona y, en consecuencia, no estás casado con nadie. Por lo tanto, puedes casarte con cualquiera, puedes casarte con todas. La gente no ve por qué no te casas con ella.

Con benevolencia el señor Verver preguntó:

—¿Y no crees que es razón suficiente el que yo no quiera?

—Sí, es razón suficiente. Pero para que realmente lo sea te ha de costar muchas molestias. Quiero decir que te ocasionará molestias a ti. Ha de significar una lucha muy dura. Si me preguntas qué has perdido, te contestaré que el no tener estas molestias, el no tener que luchar. Esto es lo que has perdido: la ventaja, la felicidad de ser exactamente lo que eres, debido precisamente a ser yo lo que era. Esto es lo que echas de menos.

A estas palabras, el padre replicó:

—En consecuencia, ¿crees que debo casarme para volver a ser lo que era antes?

El tono de indiferencia con que pronunció estas palabras —indiferencia con la que inocentemente quería divertir a su hija, dándole muestras de sus deseos de satisfacerla— consiguió arrancar de la gravedad de Maggie una corta y ligera carcajada. Ella dijo:

—Bueno, lo que yo no quiero es que pienses que si te casaras, yo no lo comprendería.

La Princesa remató estas palabras, dulcemente, con las siguientes:

—Debo comprenderlo. Y esto es todo.

El señor Verver, en tono complacido, advirtió:

—Pero no llegas al punto de querer que me case con alguien que no me gusta…

La Princesa suspiró y repuso:

—Papá, sabes muy bien hasta qué punto llego, hasta qué punto puedo llegar. Realmente, sólo deseo que si algún día alguien te gusta, jamás dudes de que me consta que he sido yo la que, con mi actitud, ha dado pie a ello. Siempre sabrás que reconozco que la culpa es mía.

Pensativo, el padre preguntó:

—¿Quieres decir que tú serás quien acepte las consecuencias?

Maggie pensó en silencio, y dijo:

—Dejaré que aceptes todas las consecuencias buenas y yo aceptaré las malas.

—Me parece muy noble por tu parte.

El señor Verver resaltó el sentido de estas palabras acercando el cuerpo de Maggie al suyo y sujetándola con el brazo más tiernamente. Añadió:

—Esto es cuanto puedo esperar de ti. Por lo tanto, en la medida en que me hayas perjudicado, podemos considerar que ahora me has resarcido: estamos en paz. Te avisaré con la debida antelación si veo la posibilidad de que tengas que cumplir tu promesa.

Hizo una pausa y prosiguió a los pocos instantes:

—Pero, entre tanto, ¿debo entender que si bien estás dispuesta a ayudarme en mi hundimiento, no lo estás tanto, o no lo estás en absoluto, a ayudarme en mi resistencia, y que debo portarme como todo un mártir para que tú sientas la inspiración de ayudarme?

Maggie puso reparos a la forma en que su padre se había expresado:

—Bueno, si te gusta la persona de que se trate, no será un hundimiento.

—En ese caso, ¿a santo de qué hablar de ayudarme? Sólo me hundiré si me gusta. Pero tengo la impresión de que no quiero que me guste.

Dichas estas palabras, el señor Verver modificó su sentido de la siguiente manera:

—Quiero decir, salvo en el caso de tener la seguridad de que realmente lo quiero. Y no quiero tener la obligación de pensar o creer que me gusta en el caso de que realmente no me guste.

Después de una pausa, confesó:

—Y esto es algo que me he visto obligado a hacer en otra clase de asuntos. No quiero obligarme a cometer un error.

Maggie comentó:

—Me parece horroroso que te veas en el caso de temer que ocurra o, por lo menos, de pensar con inquietud en ello. ¿Y qué demuestra esto sino que, en tu fuero interno, sientes un vacío, o sea, que eres sensible a esta posibilidad?

Defendiéndose de un ataque que no era tal, el señor Verver repuso:

—Quizá sí, quizá demuestre lo que tú dices, pero también demuestra, a mi parecer, que en la clase de vida que llevamos abundan las mujeres encantadoras y temibles.

Maggie meditó unos instantes estas palabras. Sin embargo, con el pretexto de su silenciosa meditación, pasó rápidamente de lo general a lo particular:

—¿Consideras que la señora Rance es encantadora?

—Bueno, considero que es temible. Y cuando una mujer así decide hacerle a uno víctima de su encantamiento, temible equivale a encantadora. Creo que la señora Rance es capaz de cualquier cosa.

Muy decidida, la Princesa añadió:

—En ese caso te ayudaré; te ayudaré a defenderte de ella, si te sirve para algo mi ayuda. Realmente es curioso que la señora Rance haya llegado a ser nuestra invitada. Y ya que has hablado de la clase de vida que llevamos, debo decir que, en su mayor parte, es también curiosa y rara.

Basándose en estas palabras, Maggie concluyó:

—La verdad es que comparándonos con la otra gente, tengo la impresión de que no llevamos vida alguna. Y si no es así, por lo menos estoy segura de que no llevamos ni siquiera la mitad de la vida que podríamos llevar. Pero me parece que Americo piensa lo mismo. Y tengo la seguridad de que Fanny Assingham es del mismo parecer.

El señor Verver, como si el respeto que le merecían las personas mencionadas le obligara a ello, meditó con cierta gravedad y preguntó:

—¿Qué clase de vida quisieran que lleváramos?

—Bueno, no creo que estén plenamente de acuerdo con este punto.

Fanny piensa que deberíamos vivir con más nobleza.

El señor Verver repitió en tono vago:

—¿Nobleza? ¿Y Americo piensa lo mismo?

La Princesa repuso inmediatamente:

—¡Oh, sí, sí! Pero Americo no se preocupa. Quiero decir que le da igual el modo en que vivimos. Estima que es asunto de nuestra competencia y basta. Ahora bien, Fanny considera que Americo se porta de una manera magnífica. Digo magnífica por aceptarlo todo tal como es, por aceptar las «limitaciones sociales» de nuestro vivir, por no echar en falta todo lo que no le proporcionamos.

El señor Verver observó:

—Bueno, pues si Americo no lo echa en falta, su magnífico comportamiento entraña pocas dificultades.

—Efectivamente, le resulta fácil. Es lo que yo creo también. Si realmente echara en falta ciertas cosas y, a pesar de ello, se comportara siempre de manera dulce e irreprochable, no cabe duda de que sería una especie de héroe de méritos más o menos ignorados. La verdad es que Americo puede ser un héroe y, en caso necesario, sería un héroe. Pero lo sería por motivos algo más importantes que nuestra monotonía.

La Princesa calló, luego con convencimiento añadió:

—No tengo la menor duda de que Americo es realmente magnífico.

Después de meditar estas palabras, volvió a abordar el tema con el que había comenzado esta última argumentación:

—De todas maneras, no estamos ligados a nada que merezca la calificación de estúpido. Si debemos vivir con más nobleza, como Fanny piensa, podemos hacerlo. Nada hay que lo impida.

Adam Verver inquirió:

—¿Se trata de una estricta obligación moral?

—No, es una cuestión de diversión.

—¿De quién? ¿De Fanny?

—De todos, aunque estimo que sería en gran parte de Fanny.

Maggie dudó. Causaba la impresión de que ahora tuviera que decir algo más. Por fin añadió:

—A poco que profundicemos en la cuestión, se trataría principalmente de diversión tuya.

Hizo una pausa y prosiguió valerosamente:

—Verdaderamente no me hace falta pensar mucho para darme cuenta de que podemos hacer en tu beneficio mucho más de lo que estamos haciendo.

El señor Verver emitió un extraño y vago sonido que precedió a sus palabras:

—¿No crees que es mucho lo que haces, cuando sales a pasear conmigo y hablas como has hablado?

Con una sonrisa, Maggie dijo:

¡Bueno, damos demasiada importancia a estos paseos!

Luego, explicó:

—Darlos es bueno y es natural, pero no tiene nobleza. Olvidamos que somos libres como el aire.

El señor Verver arguyó:

—¡Pero esto tiene nobleza!

—Lo tiene si sacamos el debido provecho. Si no, no.

Maggie seguía sonriendo, el señor Verver correspondió a su sonrisa, aun cuando un tanto intrigado e impresionado por una intensidad que contrastaba con el tono ligero en que habló:

—¿Qué quieres que haga?

Como sea que Maggie no dio contestación a la pregunta, el señor Verver añadió:

—Me parece que algo te propones.

En aquellos instantes el señor Verver advirtió con claridad que, desde principio de la charla, su hija le

había estado ocultando algo, y que esta impresión, en más de un momento, a pesar del respeto teórico que tenía hacia el actual derecho de su hija a reticencias y secretos personales, casi había dejado de ser vaga para él. Desde el principio había habido algo en la expresión de ansiedad de sus ojos y en el modo en que de vez en cuando perdía el hilo de sus pensamientos, que explicaba perfectamente la impresión del señor Verver. Ahora estaba totalmente seguro:

—Me has estado ocultando algo.

El silencio de Maggie confirmó las palabras de su padre. Por fin, habló:

—Bueno, cuando te lo diga lo comprenderás. Se trata de una carta que he recibido esta mañana. Durante todo el día no he hecho más que pensar en ello. Me he estado preguntando si éste sería el momento oportuno para preguntarte, e incluso si sería justo preguntártelo, si actualmente te sientes capaz de soportar a otra mujer.

El señor Verver se sintió un tanto aliviado; sin embargo, la amable consideración que para con él había tenido Maggie en sus palabras había dado a éstas un carácter un tanto importante. Preguntó:

—¿«Soportar» has dicho?

—Bueno, que venga a pasar una temporada aquí.

El señor Verver la miró y luego se echó a reír:

—Depende de quién sea.

—¿Lo ves? Lo que me ha inducido a pensar tanto ha sido averiguar si esta persona concreta representaría para ti otra molestia. Pero me constaba que, fuera quien fuese esta persona, te considerarías obligado a seguir tu exagerado criterio en lo referente a tratarla con amabilidad.

Estas palabras motivaron que sacudiera nerviosa y rápidamente un pie. Preguntó a la joven:

—¿Y hasta qué punto se considerará ella obligada a ser amable conmigo?

Su hija replicó:

—Lo sabes muy bien, porque se trata de Charlotte Stant.

—¿Charlotte? ¿Viene aquí?

—Me ha escrito diciéndome que le gustaría venir, si nosotros la invitáramos.

Como si esperase más revelaciones, siguió mirando a su hija. Luego, al advertir que ya le había dicho todo cuanto tenía que decirle, relajó la expresión de su cara. Si no había más, el asunto era muy simple. Dijo:

—¿Pues por qué no?

La cara de Maggie volvió a iluminarse, pero ahora con otra luz.

—¿No es una falta de tacto?

—¿Invitarla?

—Proponerte que la invites.

—¿Que yo la invite?

El señor Verver había formulado la pregunta como si fuera el efecto del resto de vaguedad que quedaba en su mente, pero, al mismo tiempo, las palabras tuvieran otro efecto diferente. Maggie meditó unos instantes; después, como llevada por un arrebato de entusiasmo, exclamó:

—¡Sería maravilloso que fueras tú quien la invitara!

Evidentemente, ésta no había sido su idea primitiva, sino que las palabras de su padre le habían proporcionado la oportunidad de formularla. El señor Verver dijo:

—¿Quieres decir que sea yo personalmente quien le dirija la carta?

—Exactamente. Sería un gesto de amabilidad, sería un gesto muy bonito por tu parte. Siempre y cuando, desde luego, puedas hacerlo sinceramente.

Durante unos instantes, causó la impresión de preguntarse a santo de qué no iba a poder hacerlo sinceramente, y preguntarse asimismo qué tenía que ver la sinceridad con aquel asunto. Esta última virtud, en las relaciones entre el señor Verver y la amiga de su hija, se había dado siempre por supuesta. Observó:

—Hija mía, puedes estar segura de que no temo a Charlotte.

—No sabes cuánto me gusta lo que acabas de decir. Y ya que no la temes en absoluto, la invitaré inmediatamente.

—¿Y puede saberse dónde se encuentra ahora?

El señor Verver había hablado como si no hubiera pensado en Charlotte, como si ni siquiera hubiera oído pronunciar su nombre desde hacía mucho tiempo. En realidad, parecía que le hubiera producido una sensación amistosamente divertida el recordar a Charlotte Stant. Su hija repuso:

—Se encuentra en un pequeño balneario de la Bretaña invitada por unas personas a quienes no conozco. Siempre está invitada en casa de alguien, la pobrecilla. No le queda otro remedio, ni siquiera, como a veces le ocurre, cuando no siente gran simpatía hacia las personas que la invitan.

—Bueno, yo diría que nosotros le gustamos.

—Sí, afortunadamente le gustamos.

Después de una pausa, Maggie añadió:

—Y si no tuviera miedo de aguarte la fiesta, incluso te diría que tú no eres quien menos le gusta de entre todos nosotros.

—¿Y por qué esto ha de aguarme la fiesta?

—Oh, papá, lo sabes perfectamente. ¿De qué hemos estado hablando, sino de esto? Gustar a alguien es muy oneroso para ti. Precisamente por esto no me atrevía a hablarte de la carta.

Miró en silencio a su hija, como si el tema de que habían estado hablando se hubiera transformado en otro irreconocible. Dijo:

—Las visitas de Charlotte nunca me han costado nada. Sonriendo, Maggie repuso:

—No, sólo los gastos propios de tener un invitado.

—Si sólo se trata de eso, carece de importancia, creo yo.

Sin embargo, era evidente que la Princesa deseaba ser sincera:

—Bueno, quizá no sólo se trata de eso. Si creo que será agradable que Charlotte pase una temporada con nosotros, se debe a que también creo que su presencia supondrá un cambio.

—¿Y qué mal hay en ello, si el cambio es para bien?

Con su sonrisa, la Princesa reveló la conciencia de su triunfal visión:

—¡Lo ves! Si reconoces la posibilidad de que se produzca un cambio para bien, resulta que, a fin de cuentas, no estamos tan formidablemente bien. Quiero decir que, en cuanto a familia, no estamos tan intensamente satisfechos, ni nos divertimos tanto como creíamos. En el caso de que estamos hablando, vemos posibilidades de una mayor nobleza.

Sorprendido, preguntó:

—¿Crees que Charlotte Stant puede darnos mayor nobleza?

Mirando fijamente a su padre, Maggie le dio una respuesta digna de atención:

—Eso creo. Realmente mayor.

El señor Verver pensó, ya que se trataba de un tema que se había ofrecido bruscamente a su atención y quería penetrar a fondo en él:

—¿Debido a lo bella que es?

Casi con solemnidad, Maggie contestó:

—No, debido a lo «señora» que es.

—«¿Señora?»

—Señora en su carácter, en su manera de ser, en su espíritu, en su vida.

—¿Sí? ¿Y qué ha hecho en la vida?

—Ha sido valerosa e inteligente. Lo que acabo de decir quizá parezca excesivo, pero se ha comportado con valentía e inteligencia ante problemas que muchas otras chicas no hubieran podido resolver. No tiene a nadie, absolutamente a nadie en el mundo. Sólo tiene conocidos que, de una manera u otra, se aprovechan siempre de ella, y algunos parientes lejanos, que tienen tanto miedo de que se aproveche de ellos que rara vez le permiten que los visite.

El señor Verver quedó un tanto intrigado y, como de costumbre, en vistas a un propósito:

—¿Y si la invitamos para que mejore nuestro vivir, no nos aprovechamos también de ella?

Estas palabras desconcertaron a la Princesa, aunque sólo durante un instante:

—Nosotros somos viejos, muy viejos amigos suyos, y en cierta manera también le hacemos un favor. Además, y en cuanto a mí respecta, en el peor de los casos, siempre la admiraré más de lo que me aproveche de ella.

—Comprendo. Eso siempre es bueno.

Maggie dudó antes de decir:

—Desde luego, a Charlotte esto le consta. Quiero decir que sabe perfectamente el alto concepto que tengo de su valentía y de su inteligencia. No tiene miedo, a nada teme, sin embargo jamás se toma libertades, como si en realidad tuviera un miedo atroz. Además, es interesante, lo que les falta a muchas otras personas con muchos más méritos de otra naturaleza.

Esta chispa de sabiduría no sólo iluminó una verdad, sino que amplió la visión de la Princesa:

—Yo, desde luego, por mi manera de ser nunca me tomo libertades, ello se debe a que siempre siento temor de algo. Es innato. Y así vivo. Con vagos acentos, su padre murmuró:

—Vamos, hija, vamos…

Maggie insistió:

—Sí, vivo aterrada.

Sin perder la placidez, el señor Verver advirtió:

—No conseguirás convencerme de que no vales tanto como Charlotte Stant.

—Quizá sea tan buena como ella, pero carezco de su nobleza de espíritu, y de nobleza estábamos hablando. Está dotada de gran imaginación. En todos los aspectos, ha adoptado una actitud noble. Sobre todo, tiene grandeza de conciencia.

En estos momentos, quizá más que en cualquier otro anterior, Maggie se dirigía a su padre con cierto matiz de conceptuación absoluta en su tono. Jamás se había atrevido tanto a decir a su padre lo que éste estaba obligado a creer. Maggie dijo:

—Carece en absoluto de dinero, pero esto nada tiene que ver con lo que hablábamos…

Después de una brevísima pausa, se corrigió:

—Mejor dicho, tiene suma importancia. Sí, porque a Charlotte le da absolutamente igual. Siempre que se ha referido a su pobreza, lo ha hecho riendo. Nadie sabe lo dura que ha sido su vida.

El tono de firmeza sin precedentes con que su hija hablaba produjo en el señor Verver el efecto de hallarse ante una realidad nueva. Dijo:

—¿Y por qué no me lo dijiste antes?

—¿Es que no lo hemos sabido siempre?

—Realmente creía que conocíamos bien todo lo referente a Charlotte.

—Ciertamente hace ya mucho tiempo que dábamos por sabido todo lo referente a ella. Pero al paso del tiempo todo cambia; tengo la impresión de que, después de este período en que no hemos visto a Charlotte, me gustará más que nunca verla. También yo he vivido más. Soy mayor, y juzgo mejor las cosas.

Hablando ahora como si estuviera animada por un sentimiento de expectación, una expectación más intensa y más amplia, Maggie añadió:

—Sí, en Charlotte veré ahora mucho más de lo que he visto en mi vida.

—También lo procuraré yo. Era una de las amigas que más me gustaba que tuvieras.

Sin embargo, Maggie estaba tan inmersa en su permitida libertad de apreciación que, por el momento, apenas oyó las palabras de su padre. Maggie estaba totalmente sumida en su apología, en pensar en los muchos aspectos en que Charlotte había destacado. Dijo:

—Por ejemplo, le hubiera gustado casarse. Estoy segura de que le hubiera gustado en gran manera. Por lo general, nada hay más ridículo, incluso cuando es patético, que una mujer que haya intentado casarse y no lo haya conseguido.

Esto llamó intensamente la atención del señor Verver:

—¿Ha «intentado»…?

—Se ha encontrado con casos concretos en que le hubiera gustado casarse.

—¿Y no lo ha conseguido?

—Bueno, en Europa, cuando se trata de chicas pobres, se dan más casos en los que la mujer no consigue casarse que casos en los que lo consigue.

Con su ininterrumpida competencia, coronó la frase, diciendo:

—Especialmente cuando se trata de norteamericanas.

Su padre le dio la justa réplica en todos los aspectos aludidos en la frase de su hija al indicarle alegremente:

—Sí, ciertamente, aunque teniendo siempre en cuenta que, cuando se trata de norteamericanas, hay más casos de muchachas ricas que de muchachas pobres.

Maggie miró a su padre con buen humor:

—Quizá estés en lo cierto, pero lo que dices, en cuanto a mí concierne, no permitiré que me hunda en el barro. Si corriera peligro de portarme como una insensata, lo superaría siendo tan amable como pudiera con las muchachas como lo es Charlotte.

Con sencillez, Maggie explicó:

—Para mí no es difícil evitar caer en el ridículo, aunque se trate de un ridículo diferente. Creo que caer

en el ridículo sería comportarme como si imaginara que he hecho algo grande e importante. El caso de Charlotte es diferente debido a que ella no ha hecho nada, como todos sabemos, y nos parece raro. Sin embargo, nadie está dispuesto a tratarla, a no ser alguien horriblemente presuntuoso y ofensivo, como si Charlotte no fuera absolutamente perfecta. Éste es el resultado de tener una personalidad que supera los obstáculos.

El silencio del señor Verver muy bien podía ser síntoma de que sus palabras habían conseguido que la historia le interesara. Sin embargo, cuando habló, aquel síntoma parecía apuntar hacia algo quizá más importante:

—¿Ya eso se debe también el que digas que Charlotte tiene «nobleza»?

—Sí, es una de las causas. Pero hay muchas otras.

De nuevo el padre meditó unos instantes antes de preguntar:

—¿Y quién es esa persona con la que Charlotte intentó casarse?

Maggie también esperó, como si quisiera mediante el previo silencio reforzar el efecto de sus palabras. Pero o bien renunció a ello o bien tropezó con un obstáculo, ya que repuso:

—Me temo que no lo sé con certeza.

—En ese caso, ¿cómo es que lo sabes?

—Es que no lo sé.

Y matizando una vez más sus palabras, añadió en tono marcadamente enfático:

—Sólo he podido deducirlo.

—Pero habrás tenido que deducirlo con referencia a una persona determinada.

Después de otra pausa, Maggie observó:

—Ni siquiera ante mí misma quiero utilizar nombres ni determinar períodos. Tengo la clara idea de que más de una vez ha habido alguien, a quien no conozco, a quien no hace falta que conozca y a quien no tengo deseos de conocer. De todas maneras, todo ha terminado; esas historias no son asunto mío, salvo en lo que, a mi juicio, enaltecen a Charlotte.

El señor Verver no la contradijo, pero le hizo una observación:

—Realmente no sé cómo pueden enaltecerla, a tu juicio, cuando ignoras los hechos ocurridos.

—¿No pueden enaltecerla, en términos generales, por su dignidad? ¿Por la dignidad con que Charlotte se ha comportado en la desgracia?

—Es que primero hay que sentar la premisa del conocimiento de la desgracia.

—Pues eso sí que puedo hacerlo. ¿Acaso no es una desgracia, cuando se es una persona tan bien dotada, vivir siempre con tanta frustración? ¿Ya pesar de ello no quejarse, sino comportarse como si ni siquiera se acordara?

Al principio el señor Verver causó la impresión de hacer frente a tan amplia pregunta, pero poco después otro punto de vista le apartó de aquellas consideraciones:

—Pues no debe seguir frustrada. No lo permitiremos.

Éste fue otro motivo de gratitud para Maggie.

—Mi querido señor, eso es todo lo que deseo.

Estas palabras habrían dejado zanjada la cuestión y terminado la charla si al cabo de un rato el padre de Maggie no hubiera dado muestras de querer volver a tratar el asunto:

—¿Y cuántas veces supones que lo ha intentado?

Una vez más, como si no hubiera sido detallista en esta cuestión tan delicada, como si no hubiera podido serlo, como si odiara la posibilidad de serlo, Maggie se sintió inducida a atenuar el sentido de sus anteriores palabras:

—¡Bueno, tampoco he dicho que lo intentara de veras!

El señor Verver quedó perplejo:

—Pero si ha fracasado de manera tan absoluta, ¿qué hizo antes de poder fracasar tanto?

—¡Ha sufrido! ¡Eso es lo que ha hecho!

Después de estas palabras, añadió:

—Ha amado y ha perdido.

A pesar de todo, el señor Verver seguía intrigado:

—Pero ¿cuántas veces?

Maggie dudó, pero no tardó en despejar sus dudas:

—Una vez basta. Basta para que se la trate con amabilidad.

El señor Verver había escuchado atentamente. En tono que en modo alguno era de reto, sino como si tuviera la necesidad de una firme base sobre la que asentar su pensamiento, habida cuenta de las nuevas revelaciones, preguntó:

—¿Y no te ha contado nada?

—¡No, a Dios gracias!

El señor Verver la miró:

—¿Es que las chicas no os contáis esas cosas?

—¿Me lo preguntas porque se cree que lo hacemos?

Maggie miró fijamente a su padre sonrojándose. Después de dudar unos instantes, le preguntó:

—¿Se las cuentan los hombres jóvenes?

El señor Verver soltó una breve carcajada:

—¿Cómo voy a saber, querida, lo que hacen los hombres jóvenes?

—En ese caso, ¿cómo voy a saber, papá, lo que hacen las muchachas vulgares?

Rápidamente, el señor Verver repuso:

—Sí, comprendo, comprendo…

Pero, en el mismo instante, Maggie habló como si hubiera sido odiosamente seca y cortante en sus frases anteriores:

—Ocurre, por lo menos, que cuando concurre mucho orgullo, concurre también mucho silencio. Reconozco que no sé lo que haría si me encontrase sola y triste. No, no lo sé, ya que ¿qué pena he sufrido en mi vida? Ni siquiera sé si tengo orgullo. Creo que jamás he tenido que plantearme esta cuestión.

Alegremente, su padre observó:

—Sí, sí, Maggie, lo tienes. Por lo menos creo que no te falta el orgullo que hay que tener en la vida.

—Bueno, pues en ese caso, albergo la esperanza de tener también cuanta humildad se precisa. De todas maneras, por lo que sé, me atrevo a aventurar que si recibiera un golpe duro quedaría acobardada. Pero, en fin, ¿cómo puedo saberlo? ¿Te das cuenta, papá, de que jamás he recibido el menor golpe?

El señor Verver le dirigió una larga y serena mirada y dijo:

—¿Y quién si no yo puede darse cuenta de ello?

Después de soltar una breve carcajada parecida por muy buenas razones a la que había soltado su padre momentos antes, Maggie dijo:

—¡Te aseguro que cuando lo reciba te enterarás! De todas maneras, no hubiera permitido que Charlotte me contara algo que, para mí, sería horroroso. Estas ofensas y estas vergüenzas son terribles.

Conteniéndose un poco, añadió:

—Al menos supongo que lo son, sí, porque a fin de cuentas, como he dicho, no he sufrido nada parecido. ¡Y no quiero enterarme de lo que significan!

Con gran vehemencia, siguió diciendo:

—¡Hay cosas sagradas, tanto si se trata de penas como de alegrías! Pero, para mayor seguridad, y siempre que sea posible, se debe ser amable.

Al decir estas últimas palabras, se puso en pie. Y en pie quedó ante el señor Verver, con aquella peculiar expresión en su aspecto que ni siquiera la larga costumbre de una vida en común había conseguido hurtar a su percepción. Era una expresión penetrante y, como tal, mantenida año tras año, y nacida de la comparación de tipos y de rasgos, de objeto bello con objeto bello, de la gradación de perfectos acabados, de la exquisitez de unas formas con otras. Era como si el aspecto de una leve y esbelta «antigüedad» de alguna sala vaticana o capitolina o de un período tardío y refinado, raro e inmortal a un tiempo, hubiera adquirido movimiento gracias a la insuflación de un impulso moderno y, sin embargo, a pesar de la súbita libertad de los pliegues y de los pasos, salidos de su pedestal después de siglos, conservara todavía la calidad y la perfecta felicidad de la estatua; los ojos de mirada borrosa y ausente, la pulida, elegante y anónima cabeza, el impersonal vuelo de un ser perdido en una época extraña que pasara como una imagen de desgastado relieve, dando vueltas y vueltas alrededor de una jarra preciosa. Maggie siempre había tenido extraños momentos en los que sorprendía al señor Verver, a pesar de ser su hija, como si se tratara de la figura anteriormente descrita, una figura con la cual la humana vinculación de su padre quedaba casi interrumpida por cierta vaga analogía de talante y actitud, por algo tímidamente mitológico y de naturaleza semejante a la de las ninfas. No sin complacencia, el señor Verver comprendía que todo lo anterior tenía su origen principalmente en su propia mente y procedía de su amor a las vasijas preciosas, que sólo era inferior al que tenía por las hijas preciosas. Todo ocurría, lo cual resultaba todavía más pertinente al caso,

mientras tenía plena conciencia de que Maggie era calificada incluso en su belleza de «pulida». La señora Rance había utilizado con entusiasmo esta palabra, aplicándola a Maggie. Recordaba que en cierta ocasión que en su presencia dijeron a Maggie en tono amistoso y familiar, que tenía aspecto de monja, ella replicó que le complacía en gran manera que se lo dijeran, y que se esforzaría por conservarlo. Por fin, también tenía conciencia de que su hija, discretamente olvidadiza de los saltos y altibajos de las modas, por su larga familiaridad con la nobleza del arte, llevaba el cabello peinado en línea descendente, liso y aplanado sobre las sienes, a la manera en que siempre lo había llevado su madre, quien había sido, en no escasa medida, mitológica. Las ninfas y las monjas eran ciertamente seres diferentes, pero el señor Verver, cuando realmente se divertía, prescindía de la coherencia. Jugar con las impresiones visuales era para él un hábito tan enraizado, que podía recibir estas impresiones mientras se entregaba a pensar seriamente. Y pensaba seriamente mientras Maggie se encontraba allí ante él; estos pensamientos le llevaron a formular una pregunta, pregunta que, a su vez, le llevó a formular otras:

—¿Consideras, pues, tal como has dicho hace poco, que éste es el estado en que se encuentra Charlotte?

—¿Qué estado?

—Pues el estado de haberlo «superado todo», debido a lo muy intensamente que ha amado.

Maggie apenas tuvo que reflexionar. Su respuesta fue inmediata:

—No, no ha superado nada, pues nada ha conseguido.

—Comprendo. Es preciso haber tenido cosas, para superarlas. Es algo así como una ley de perspectiva.

Maggie nada sabía acerca de esa ley, pero prosiguió diciendo con acento firme:

—Por ejemplo, no ha superado la necesidad de ayuda.

—Pues en este caso tendrá toda la ayuda que podamos prestarle. Le escribiré con sumo placer.

Dirigiéndole una alegre y tierna mirada, Maggie exclamó:

—¡Eres un ángel!

Sin embargo, a pesar de que tal definición bien pudiera ser verdad, es preciso añadir que el señor Verver, caso de ser un ángel, era un ángel dotado de curiosidad:

—¿Realmente te ha dicho Charlotte que me tiene gran simpatía?

—Es cierto, pero no quiero halagarte en exceso. Bástete saber que ésta ha sido una de las razones por las que Charlotte siempre me ha gustado.

En tono más o menos humorístico, el señor Verver observó:

—Ciertamente no lo ha superado todo.

—Bueno, no he querido decir que Charlotte esté enamorada de ti. No. Como te he dicho al principio, nada tienes que temer desde este punto de vista.

El señor Verver había hecho su anterior observación en tono alegre, pero tal alegría pareció menguar un tanto a consecuencia de las tranquilizadoras palabras de su hija, como si ésta le hubiera alarmado con exageración, exageración que debía ser corregida, por lo que dijo:

—Siempre la he considerado una niña.

La Princesa dijo:

—No es una niña.

—En ese caso, le escribiré como se escribe a una mujer brillante.

—Es exactamente eso.

El señor Verver se había levantado y durante unos instantes, antes de emprender el camino de regreso, quedaron los dos mirándose el uno al otro, como si realmente hubiesen solucionado un problema. Habían salido juntos para estar solos, pero algo nuevo había surgido entre los dos. Lo que había surgido quedó expresado en las palabras con las que él comentó el énfasis de la última frase de su hija:

—Parece que Charlotte tiene en ti a una gran amiga, Princesa.

Maggie aceptó estas palabras por ser de tan claro significado que difícilmente podían suscitar su protesta. Y preguntó:

—¿Sabes en qué estoy pensando realmente?

Él meditó, mientras Maggie le miraba con expresión de satisfacción por la libertad de hablar de que ahora gozaba. Y el señor Verver demostró que no era lerdo en modo alguno, al descubrir rápidamente su pensamiento:

—En encontrarle marido.

Sonriendo, Maggie repuso:

—¡Sí, señor! ¡Bravo! Luego, Maggie añadió:

—Pero habrá que buscar un poco.
Mientras echaban a andar, el señor Verver dijo:
—Se lo buscaremos juntos.

Capítulo XI

La señora Assingham y el coronel habían regresado ya tras haberse ido de Fawns antes de terminar septiembre; ahora, un par de semanas después del regreso, interrumpían de nuevo su estancia dejando en esta ocasión la cuestión de su vuelta pendiente de unos asuntos que insinuaron más que mencionarlos inoportunamente. Las Lutche y la señora Rance también habían dado término a su estancia por haber llegado Charlotte Stant, pero expresando esperanzas y teorías referentes a que pronto renovarían su estancia, y su animada despedida había despertado ecos en el gran vestíbulo de losas de piedra y paneles de roble, prolongándose en una galería que sin ser, ni con mucho, el menos interesante lugar de la casa, todavía parecía conmover el aire. Fue en este admirable lugar donde Fanny Assingham, antes de terminar su estancia de octubre, pasó unos momentos con su amable anfitrión, durante los cuales le anunció su partida o temporal ausencia, en compañía de su marido, que le llevaron a señalar la inconveniencia de todo género de vanas consideraciones referentes a su partida. Las puertas de la casa estaban abiertas al neblinoso esplendor del sol otoñal a aquella hora sin viento, hora de espera, bajo cuya influencia el señor Verver se reunió con su afable amiga cuando ésta bajó para dejar con sus propias manos un montón de cartas en el buzón. Después los dos salieron de la casa y pasaron media hora en la terraza; fue la reunión de dos personas que verdaderamente se despedían la una de la otra al iniciar diferentes sendas. Al considerarlo, Adam Verver halló el origen de tal impresión en unas sencillas palabras que la señora Assingham había utilizado al referirse a Charlotte Stant: «Sencillamente, las ha barrido». Sí, aquéllas fueron las cuatro palabras pronunciadas respecto a la paz dorada que el octubre de Kent había creado; aquellos días culminantes, rebosantes de belleza, sucediéndose esplendorosamente desde la llegada de Charlotte Stant. Sí, fue precisamente en el curso de estos días cuando se vio a la señora Rance y las señoritas Lutche reunir sus cosas en vista a su partida; gracias a este cambio, el sentido de la situación considerada globalmente tuvo un carácter sumamente justo y armonioso; este sentido entrañaba lo acertadas que habían estado dichas señoras al no prolongar más su estancia, y entrañaba también todos los placeres que aquel fértil otoño podía llevar en su regazo. Esto fue lo que ocurrió, ésta fue la lección que las damas recibieron. La señora Assingham había insistido en que sin Charlotte sólo habrían aprendido la mitad de la lección. Ciertamente nadie habría aprendido ni media palabra de esta lección si la estancia de la señora Rance y de las señoritas Lutche hubiera sido tan prolongada como en cierto momento pareció que iba a serlo. En resumen, la leve intervención de Charlotte se había convertido en una causa que operó de manera encubierta aunque no por ello menos activa, y el parlamento de Fanny Assingham, que se prolongó un poco, todavía producía ecos en el fuero interno de Adam Verver, de manera que le dejaban un tanto sobresaltado porque le causaban la impresión de la existencia de una realidad irresistible. Adam Verver podía ver ahora la manera en que aquella fuerza superior había actuado; le gustaba recordarlo, recordar a las tres mujeres sin que soñara siquiera que constituía una maldad, ni siquiera el asomo de un deseo pecaminoso; a las tres, a fin de cuentas, había agasajado en su casa durante una serie de días notablemente largos. La maravillosa Charlotte se había comportado en este asunto con tal vaguedad y talante tan sereno, que él ni siquiera se enteró de lo que sucedía, de lo que sucedía a consecuencia de la influencia de Charlotte. La señora Assingham había observado: «Los fuegos, tan pronto percibieron su presencia, se transformaron en humo». Estas palabras el señor Verver las meditó incluso durante el paseo que dio en compañía de la señora Assingham. Desde su

larga conversación con Maggie, la que había determinado que invitara directamente a su común amiga, había adquirido una pequeña y extraña afición, como él diría, a que le hablaran de aquella joven mujer, a escuchar lo que se podía decir de ella, y, valga la expresión, de manera que casi parecía que la mano de un eminente pintor estuviera haciendo su retrato y él contemplara cómo se iba formando mediante la acumulación de pinceladas. A su juicio, la señora Assingham aplicó en el curso de la conversación dos o tres de las mejores pinceladas acerca de su joven y común amiga, ahora figura tan diferente de aquella compañera de juegos de Maggie: con respecto a ella el señor Verver casi podía recordar antiguas ocasiones en las que paternalmente había indicado a las dos niñas, con igualdad de trato, que no debían hacer demasiado ruido ni comer demasiada mermelada. La señora Assingham había afirmado que, vista la rápida influencia ejercida por Charlotte, no había dejado de experimentar una punzada de lástima hacia las invitadas que recientemente habían partido:

—En realidad me dieron tanta lástima que oculté mis sentimientos mientras estuvieron aquí, con el deseo de que los restantes moradores de la casa no se dieran cuenta, es decir, para que Maggie, el Príncipe, usted e incluso la propia Charlotte no lo adivinaran por mi comportamiento, en el caso de que no lo advirtieran por sí mismos. Como usted no se dio cuenta, evidentemente, quizá ahora mis palabras le parezcan exageradas. Pero no lo son. Seguí el caso paso a paso. Se veía cómo las pobrecillas iban reaccionando, de la misma manera que, supongo, los invitados en la corte de los Borgias se miraban los unos a los otros al comenzar a sentirse mal después de haber tenido el honor de tomar una copa de vino con los cabezas de la familia. Esta comparación es un tanto torpe, ya que no quiero insinuar, ni mucho menos, que Charlotte echara conscientemente veneno en las copas de dichas señoras. Verdaderamente el veneno era la propia Charlotte, en el sentido de estar moralmente en desacuerdo con ellas. Pero esto Charlotte lo ignoraba.

Muy interesado, el señor Verver preguntó:

—¿No lo sabía?

La señora Assingham tuvo que reconocer que no había llegado a preguntárselo a la propia Charlotte:

—Bueno, supongo que lo ignoraba. No pretendo estar segura de lo que Charlotte sabe en ninguna materia. Desde luego, a ella no le gusta hacer sufrir al prójimo. En términos generales no, al contrario de lo que les ocurre a muchas mujeres. A Charlotte ni siquiera le gusta hacer sufrir a las otras mujeres. Al igual que a todas las personas agradables, le gusta gustar.

El señor Verver preguntó:

—¿Le gusta gustar?

—Efectivamente. Y al mismo tiempo, qué duda cabe, quiso ayudarnos, quería tranquilizarnos. Es decir, quería tranquilizarle a usted y tranquilizar a Maggie en lo tocante a usted. En este sentido, Charlotte tenía un plan. Pero únicamente después, no creo realmente que fuera antes, se dio cuenta de lo muy eficaz que era su actuación.

Una vez más, consideró que verdaderamente tendría que haber advertido lo que la señora Assingham le decía:

—¡Ah…! ¿Conque quería ayudarnos? ¿Quería ayudarme, a mí?

Al cabo de unos instantes de silencio la señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿Yeso le sorprende?

Después de pensar un poco, el señor Verver repuso:

—¡No! ¡No me sorprende!

—Desde luego, tan pronto como llegó aquí, Charlotte vio con su habitual rapidez cuál era el lugar que cada uno de nosotros ocupaba. No tenía necesidad alguna de concertar la pertinente cita con cada uno y que éste acudiera a su dormitorio, por la noche, o fuera a pasear con ella al campo para contarle su emocionada historia. Sin embargo, también hay que reconocer que la propia Charlotte se sentía un poco incómoda.

El señor Verver, un tanto a la expectativa, preguntó:

—¿Por culpa de aquellas pobres señoras?

—Bueno, digamos que Charlotte se sentía incómoda al ver que ustedes no se sentían incómodos por culpa de las señoras en cuestión, principalmente al ver que usted no se sentía incómodo. *Par example*, no tengo la menor duda de que Charlotte estima que usted es excesivamente humilde.

—¿Me considera humilde?

—A Charlotte se la llamó para que solucionara el problema que usted tenía planteado. En realidad lo

único que Charlotte tenía que hacer era tratarle a usted con amabilidad.

—¿A mí?

Ahora el señor Verver podía recordar que la señora Assingham se había reído del tono en que él había formulado esta pregunta en el curso de aquella conversación. La señora Assingham dijo:

—A usted y a todos. Para conseguirlo le bastaba con comportarse tal como es para con todos. Es encantadora y no puede evitarlo. Se comportó de manera encantadora, aun cuando produjo efectos de la misma manera que el vino de los Borgia producía efectos, por lo general. Se vio cómo la manera de actuar de Charlotte les fue afectando, se advirtió hasta qué punto una mujer, con su personalidad tan diferente a ellas, tan diferente, puede ser encantadora. Se vio cómo iban comprendiéndolo, cómo iban intercambiando miradas, cómo perdían los ánimos y decidían irse. Sí, porque llegaron a comprender que Charlotte es un producto genuino.

—¡Ah…! ¿Charlotte es un producto genuino, verdad?

Como sea que, hasta el presente, el señor Verver no lo había comprendido tan bien como la señora Rance y las señoritas Lutche, ahora tuvo que dar forzosamente la impresión de someterse a la verdad al formular su pregunta. Por fin pudo decir sencillamente:

—Ya… Comprendo, comprendo.

Sin embargo, no por eso dejó de mostrar interés en saber lo que era un «producto genuino», por lo que preguntó a su amiga:

—¿Y qué quiere decir exactamente con estas palabras?

Por unos instantes, la señora Assingham tuvo ciertas dificultades en expresarlo, pero al fin dijo:

—Pues es exactamente lo que esas mujeres quieren ser, y lo que el efecto que Charlotte ha producido en ellas les ha obligado a reconocer que nunca serán.

—Claro, claro… Nunca.

Después de esta conversación no sólo quedó bien sentada y aceptada entre los dos, sino que se desarrolló y adquirió profundidad, la idea de que la comodidad y placer de la existencia del señor Verver volvía a estar ahora debidamente atendida, socialmente hablando, gracias a lo que se había calificado y sellado como «genuino» de una manera tal que el señor Verver había tenido la oportunidad de considerar anteriormente, de cara al matrimonio de su hija. La nota de realismo en la proyección de tanta luz siguió teniendo para él el encanto y la importancia cuya máxima gradación había encontrado ocasionalmente en sus grandes «hallazgos», y siguió manteniéndole atento y satisfecho más que en otro caso cualquiera. Quizá no haya nada que pueda parecernos más raro, a poco que reflexionemos sobre ello, como aplicar la misma medida de valoración a objetos de propiedades diferentes como antiguas alfombras persas, por ejemplo, y nuevas adquisiciones humanas. Tanto más cuanto que nuestro amable caballero no dejaba de percibir indicios de que era, en lo de catador de la vida, persona propensa a la economía. Ponía en un minúsculo vasito todo lo que se llevaba a los labios, y parecía que siempre hubiera llevado en su bolsillo, como una herramienta de su oficio, aquel vasito tallado con una belleza de la que el arte se había perdido largo tiempo atrás, guardado en una caja de cuero en la que se hubieran estampado imborrablemente en oro las armas de una dinastía depuesta. De la misma forma que este instrumento le había servido para quedar convencido, valga la expresión, tanto en lo tocante a Americo como en lo tocante a Bernardino Luini que había descubierto en los días en que se disponía a dar su consentimiento para el anuncio de los esponsales de su hija, también le había servido en la actualidad para quedar convencido en lo tocante a Charlotte Stant y a un extraordinario conjunto de azulejos orientales cuya existencia había llegado a su conocimiento recientemente, dotados de una fascinante leyenda, y de los que tenía la satisfacción de saber que podría conseguir más amplia información gracias a cierto señor Gutermann-Seuss, de Brighton. En el caso del señor Verver, todo se debía a aquel principio estético asentado allí donde pudiera arder con fría y quieta llama, allí donde se alimentara íntegramente de los objetos en que directamente se centraba su atención, de la idea (sugerida por la apropiación) de la belleza plástica, de la cosa visiblemente perfecta en su género; en resumen, a pesar de la general tendencia del «elemento devorador» a ampliar sus dominios, el resto de su mobiliario espiritual, modesto, desperdigado, y conservado con inconsciente cuidado esquivaba la destrucción que, en tantos casos, es consecuencia de mantener fuegos en profanos altares. En otras palabras, Adam Verver había aprendido la lección de los sentidos, acorde con su breve código, sin haber provocado ni siquiera en una ocasión el más leve escándalo en su economía globalmente considerada; en este aspecto no era muy diferente de aquellos afortunados caballeros solteros dados a los placeres, que dan tal tratamiento a las compañías comprometedoras, que ni siquiera la más austera ama de llaves, ocupada en materias de su

competencia en la planta baja de la casa, se siente obligada a dar la más leve sugerencia.

Sin embargo, estas últimas figuras gozan de una libertad que difícilmente cabe aplicar a la ocasión que estamos tratando, aunque bien podemos retenerlas en nuestra mente, en virtud de su impreciso valor negativo. Gracias a una presión del interior, sucedió que antes de transcurrir los diez primeros días del mes de noviembre, Adam Verver se encontró prácticamente solo en Fawns, en compañía de su joven amiga; Americo y Maggie le habían solicitado, de manera un poco súbita, que les diera permiso para ir al extranjero durante un mes, ya que la diversión de Americo estaba actualmente no menos felizmente garantizada que su seguridad económica. Un impulso eminentemente natural había surgido del interior del Príncipe. Su vida, durante bastante tiempo invariable, era deliciosamente monótona y, en consecuencia, la que más le gustaba en líneas generales; pero un leve soplo de nostalgia había rozado el espíritu del Príncipe y Maggie repitió a su padre, con infinita admiración, las lindas palabras con las que el Príncipe le había manifestado sus sentimientos cuando llevaba ya algún tiempo experimentándolos. El Príncipe los llamó una «serenata», una música en sordina que, junto a una de las ventanas, en la parte exterior de la casa dormida, perturbaba su descanso nocturno. Pese a que tal música tenía carácter leve y plañidero, no le permitía pegar ojo y, por fin, cuando decidió levantarse y acercarse de puntillas a la ventana y mirar, en la figura que abajo había, con una mandolina, toda ella tenebrosamente arropada en su gracia, alzados los ojos suplicantes e irresistible la voz, reconoció a la eternamente amada Italia. Siendo así la realidad, tarde o temprano tenía el Príncipe que responder a la llamada. Era como un ser fantasmal siempre presente, siempre acechando, como el espíritu de un ser al que se ha infligido un daño, una oscura y patética sombra que llora para que la consuelen. Sólo había un medio de conseguirlo. Todo lo anterior fue un modo de expresar con demasiadas palabras un hecho tan sencillo como el de que un romano de tan pura estirpe tuviera deseos de volver a ver Roma. En consecuencia, más valía que fueran a Roma por una breve temporada. Maggie transmitió a su padre esas tan absurdas y complicadas razones, lo cual divirtió de tal manera a Adam Verver que se las repitió a Charlotte Stant, a quien, a la sazón, el señor Verver tenía clara conciencia de comunicarle muchas cosas, añadiendo las palabras que le había dicho Maggie acerca de que, pensándolo bien, aquélla era la primera petición que Americo le había formulado desde que la conocía. En tono de benévola crítica el señor Verver comentó: «Desde luego, Maggie olvida que también le pidió que se casara con él». Tuvo ocasión de comprobar que Charlotte quedó tan conmovida como él por las ingeniosas palabras de Maggie, y plenamente de acuerdo en cuanto al fondo del asunto. Incluso si el Príncipe hubiera pedido algo a su esposa todos los días del año, no habría sido razón suficiente para que el pobre Príncipe, víctima de un hermoso arrebato de añoranza, no visitara su tierra natal sin provocar reproches.

Además el suegro del Príncipe aconsejó a la razonable, realmente razonable pareja, que, puestos a viajar, pasaran también tres o cuatro semanas en París, ya que París siempre fue, en todo momento de efusión para el señor Verver, ciudad cuya visita recomendaba espontáneamente. Si iban a París en el viaje de regreso, o cuando quisieran, Charlotte y el señor Verver se reunirían con ellos allí durante unos días, aunque con toda seguridad, dijo, en manera alguna lo harían debido a que al quedar solos se aburrieran. El destino de esta última propuesta fue, por el momento, tambalearse bajo el fuego del destructivo análisis que de ella hizo Maggie, quien —hallándose en el caso, como reconoció, de elegir entre ser una hija desnaturalizada o una madre desnaturalizada, había elegido lo primero— preguntó qué sería del Principino si en la casa sólo quedaba la servidumbre. Su pregunta tuvo notable resonancia, pero luego, al igual que ocurría con tantas y tantas preguntas de Maggie, quedó olvidada con más firmeza todavía de lo que se había planteado. La conclusión a que se llegó, antes de la partida de la joven pareja, fue que la señora Noble y el doctor Brady montarían guardia con absoluta responsabilidad ante la augusta cuna. Si Maggie no hubiera tenido una fe suprema en el mayestático valor de aquella ama, cuya experiencia constituía la más amplia almohada, de la misma forma que su atención era como un extenso dosel del que los precedentes y los recuerdos colgaban como gruesas cortinas corridas, si Maggie no hubiera podido descansar en esta confianza, habría dejado que su marido efectuara el viaje solo. De la misma forma, si el más adorable de los mediquillos rurales —así le calificaba Maggie— no le hubiera demostrado su sabiduría convirtiéndose en necesidad irresistible conversar con él especialmente en días lluviosos y proporción directa a la frecuencia de sus visitas, fuera cual fuese el tiempo que hiciera, durante horas y horas acerca de causas y efectos, acerca de lo que el doctor había averiguado en su pequeña biblioteca casera, poco consuelo habría representado para ella la mera presencia de un simple abuelo y de una brillante amiga. En consecuencia, dichas personas, después de desvanecerse la insistencia de Maggie por el momento, podían desempeñar con indudable competencia y, sobre todo, mediante su recíproca ayuda, sus conspicuos deberes. Cada cual en la

medida de la importancia de su oficio ayudaría al otro, lo cual sería, teniendo en consideración la superior importancia que daban a la señora Noble, no poco consuelo y tranquilidad para ellos.

El señor Verver se reunía con su joven amiga a ciertas horas en el cuarto del niño, de manera muy parecida a aquella otra en que regularmente se reunía con la amante madre del niño, dándose la circunstancia de que Charlotte, porque lo consideraba su deber, había prometido a Maggie cumplir sus funciones, y en ningún momento olvidaba las últimas noticias para consignarlas en la carta diaria que había prometido escribir. Escribía Charlotte con gran fidelidad, y así lo decía a su amigo, lo que produjo como era de esperar que éste no escribiera. La razón consistía, en parte, en que Charlotte contaba en sus cartas «todo lo referente al señor Verver». También se lo dijo a éste, y a él le gustaba tener la sensación, a consecuencia de lo anterior, de estar, en términos generales y de manera harto sistemática, atendido en todo y, como suele decirse, «servido». Entregado, como bien podemos decir, a aquella encantadora e inteligente joven convertida en un recurso doméstico, ésta se había transformado para él prácticamente en una nueva persona, y estaba entregado a ella sobre todo en su propia casa, lo cual, en cierto modo, daba más profundo sentido a dicha entrega. El señor Verver sintió interés en averiguar a qué punto podía llevarle aquella vinculación, en averiguar si incluso podía conducirle, haciendo con ello una prueba que sería agradable verificar, a aquello que Fanny Assingham había dicho, por lo menos, en lo tocante al cambio que una muchacha como aquélla podía comportar. En la actualidad, realmente Charlotte significaba un cambio en la simplificada existencia de los dos, un cambio considerable a pesar de que con nadie se la podía comparar como tan útilmente pudo compararla Fanny Assingham, por cuanto allí no estaba la señora Rance, ni Kitty, ni Dotty Lutche para ayudar a Charlotte a que causara la impresión de ser, según el diagnóstico de Fanny, genuina. Charlotte era decididamente genuina gracias a otras causas; el señor Verver se sintió incluso un poco divertido al pensar en la cantidad de maquinaciones que la señora Assingham había necesitado, al parecer, para ponerlo de relieve. Era directa e inmediatamente genuina, genuina en una agradable, reducida e íntima escala, y en momento alguno lo era tanto como en aquéllos —a los que acabamos de referirnos sólo de soslayo— en que la señora Noble les causaba la impresión, cuando estaban los dos juntos, de que ella, la señora Noble, y sólo ella, era en la ausencia de la reina madre, la regenta del reino y la aya del heredero. Tratados en semejantes ocasiones como una pareja de inútiles y meramente honoríficos funcionarios de la corte, en el mejor de los casos, de pintorescos cortesanos hereditarios con la sola prerrogativa de *petites entrées*, aun cuando totalmente ajenos al Estado, que comenzaba y terminaba en las habitaciones del niño, no les quedaba más remedio que retirarse en sociabilidad rápidamente creciente a lo que les quedaba del palacio para digerir allí su dorada insignificancia y cultivar, con respecto a la verdadera Gobernadora, ironías cual nacidas entre pizca y pizca de rapé, propias de chambelanes rococó rodeados de figuras de perrillos falderos de porcelana.

Todas las noches, después de la cena, Charlotte Stant, sentada al piano tocaba para él sus piezas favoritas —que eran muchas— con una facilidad infalible, o sólo vacilaba un poco, a causa de un leve tarareo de la insegura voz del señor Verver, para volver enseguida a reafirmarse. Charlotte sabía tocarlo todo, siempre de manera extravagante, como ella afirmaba con insistencia, pero siempre, según el vago criterio del señor Verver, de la misma forma que, esbelta, sinuosa y fuerte, y dotada de ejercitada pasión, hubiera podido jugar al tenis, o bailar rítmica e incesantemente valses y valses. El amor del señor Verver por la música se basaba, a diferencia de sus otros amores, en cierto sentido de la vaguedad, pero mientras él, sentado en el sofá relativamente envuelto en penumbra, y fumando, fumando, siempre fumando, los cigarros de su juventud, cuyo hedor a tantos hechos estaba asociado; mientras, como digo, escuchaba el piano de Charlotte, en el que siempre faltaba la partitura pero, entre las velas encendidas, el cuadro era visible, la vaguedad se extendía a su alrededor como una alfombra sin límites, como una superficie deliciosamente suave sobre la que ejercer la presión de su interés. Era una manera de pasar el tiempo que, en cierto sentido, sustituía la conversación; pero, a pesar de todo, al final, el aire parecía rebosante de los ecos de una conversación. Se separaban en la casa silenciosa con cierta dificultad, aun cuando no de una manera claramente embarazosa, con velas cuyas llamas bailaban en los grandes espacios oscuros y, casi siempre, tan tarde que hasta el último solemne doméstico había ya recibido autorización para retirarse.

Un noche de finales de octubre, ya muy tarde, se formaron una o dos frases completas en el todavía móvil mar de otras voces, una o dos frases que a nuestro amigo le parecieron, incluso en aquel momento, un tanto extrañas, más altas y más redondeadas que todo sonido anterior; luego, el señor Verver se quedó en la sala, so pretexto de cerrar una ventana, después de despedirse de su amiga en el vestíbulo y de contemplar cómo, envuelta en la luz de la vela, subía la escalinata. No sentía deseos de acostarse, sino otros

muy concretos. En el vestíbulo se puso un sombrero y se echó una capa sobre los hombros. Después de encender otro cigarro, salió a la terraza por un balcón de la sala y estuvo allí paseando durante una hora, bajo las nítidas estrellas del otoño. Aquél era el lugar en que había paseado con Fanny Assingham al sol de la tarde. Volvió a sentir las sensaciones de aquel otro momento, las sensaciones de aquella sugerente mujer, como si, a pesar de la previa degustación que hemos insinuado, todavía no se hubieran producido. En un orden deslavazado, casi agitado, pensó en muchas cosas; la capacidad de agitarle que estos pensamientos tenían se debía en parte a su convicción de que tardaría en dormirse. En realidad, tuvo la impresión durante un rato de que no debía volver a dormir jamás, hasta que algo le ocurriera, hasta que recibiera cierta luz, hasta que se le ocurriera cierta idea, o cierta simple frase feliz que había comenzado a necesitar, pero que hasta el presente y, principalmente, desde ayer o anteayer, había buscado en vano a tientas. «¿Realmente podrá usted venir, si salimos temprano?». Esto era, prácticamente, todo lo que había dicho a la muchacha en el momento en que ésta cogía la vela para subir a su dormitorio. «¿Cómo no voy a poder, si no tengo otra cosa que hacer y además me gustaría inmensamente?» fueron las palabras que por parte de Charlotte dieron fin a la pequeña escena. En realidad, nada había ocurrido que pudiera llamarse así, ni siquiera la más leve sospecha, aun cuando el señor Verver, sin saber exactamente por qué, tuvo la impresión de que algo muy parecido a la amenaza de una escena se había producido cuando la muchacha se detuvo a mitad de la escalera para volverse hacia él y, mirándole desde lo alto, decirle que le prometía contentarse, por todo equipaje en aquel viaje, con una esponja y un cepillo para los dientes. De todas formas, mientras el señor Verver paseaba, se cernían a su alrededor impresiones que ya le eran familiares, así como dos o tres que le resultaban nuevas; la no menos vívida entre las primeras se relacionaba con aquella sensación que tenía de ser tratado con consideración, lo que había llegado a ser para el señor Verver, como hemos advertido anteriormente, uno de los menores incidentes de ser suegro. Hasta el presente había considerado que la composición de aquel bálsamo sólo Americo la poseía como si el secreto fuera un privilegio hereditario. Por lo tanto, ahora el señor Verver se descubrió a sí mismo en el trance de preguntarse si acaso tal secreto había llegado a conocimiento de Charlotte, que indudablemente lo poseía, gracias a habérselo dado a conocer amablemente el joven Príncipe. Fuera cual fuera la verdad, no cabía duda de que Charlotte utilizaba en beneficio de su tan discretamente agradecido anfitrión los mismos detalles de atención y consideración, y era igualmente maestra, con el mismo grado, en el regulado y complejo arte de colocarle en un lugar muy alto de la escala de importancias. Ésta era, incluso según el criterio del propio señor Verver, una manera torpe de expresar la similitud del agradable efecto que cada una de aquellas dos personas producían en él, y ello le indujo a pensar durante unos instantes, tan sólo porque esta coincidencia en el buen hacer de uno y otra le inducía vagamente a relacionar o asociar a aquellos dos en cuanto hacía referencia a las tradiciones, la educación, el tacto o como se le quiera llamar. Casi parecía —en el caso de tener que expresar imaginariamente dicho vínculo entre Charlotte y el Príncipe— que Americo hubiera «adiestrado» un poco a su joven y común amiga, o que la hubiera incitado, o quizá simplemente que ésta, en una muestra más de la general perfección que Fanny tanto alababa en ella, hubiera observado provechosamente la placentera aplicación que el Príncipe hacía de su personal sistema durante el breve período en que tuvo la oportunidad de hacerlo antes de la partida de los viajeros. El señor Verver se preguntaba en qué consistía exactamente aquello en cuya virtud los dos se parecían en el modo de tratarle, se preguntaba de qué noble y difundido convencionalismo, en los casos en que la «importancia» exquisita no debía ser groseramente atribuida ni groseramente denegada, habían extraído su específica lección, pero la dificultad radicaba naturalmente en que no había manera de saberlo, a no ser que uno hubiera sido de veras un personaje semejante a papa, a rey, a par, a general o solamente a un elegante escritor.

Ante semejante pregunta, lo mismo que ante otras de parecida naturaleza cuando se le venían a las mientes, el señor Verver detenía sus pasos, apoyaba los brazos en el viejo pretil, y su mente se perdía en remotos pensamientos. Al igual que en muchas otras materias, tenía más de un parecer, y esto era precisamente lo que le indujo a buscar en su inquietud una idea agazapada en el vasto frescor de la noche, al impulso de la cual las disparidades se sometieran a fusionarse y, extendiéndose a sus pies, le causaran la impresión de flotar. Y descubrió que aquello que volvía constantemente a su mente, de modo harto inquietante, era la reflexión más profunda que cualquier otra de que al formar un nuevo e íntimo vínculo, forzosamente tendría que abandonar a su hija, o por lo menos alejarse notoriamente de ella. El señor Verver tenía que dar forma definitiva a la idea —lo cual era inevitable— de que había perdido a su hija al contraer matrimonio, debía dar forma definitiva a la idea de haber cometido un delito, o en el menor de los casos una impertinencia, que exigía dar una compensación y merecía enmienda. Y tanto más debía hacerlo

cuanto que —éste era punto de suma importancia— debía adoptar las apariencias de hacerlo por causa del sentimiento, en realidad de la simple convicción experimentada y expresada por Maggie en su hermosa generosidad, de lo mucho que él había sufrido —en expresión exageradamente extravagante— por culpa de Maggie. Y si bien era cierto que ella lo expresaba con extravagante exageración, tampoco cabía negar que era sincera, por cuanto tenía su origen —que Maggie también expresaba con extravagante exageración— en la constante insistencia de pensar, sentir y hablar con respecto a su padre como si se tratara de un hombre joven. Momentos había en los que Adam Verver vislumbraba, cuando oía hablar de esta manera a Maggie, expresando libremente sus sentimientos, lo que parecía el específico daño que su hija le había infligido y que consistía en que él tenía una infinidad de años por delante dedicados a gemir y gemir. Maggie había sacrificado a un padre, a un padre que era la joya suma entre los padres, que no era mayor que ella. El daño infligido por Maggie no habría tenido tanta importancia si el señor Verver hubiera tenido los años normales entre los padres. Que no fuera así, que el señor Verver fuera, por extraordinaria circunstancia, semejante y contemporáneo suyo era precisamente lo que hacía que el acto de Maggie tuviera tan larga estela de consecuencias. Por fin se hizo la luz en su mente, precisamente a consecuencia de su temor a inhalar aire helado en el jardín de la lozana espiritualidad de Maggie. Como si doblara una esquina de aquel laberinto en que se hallaba, vio la situación en que estaba con suma claridad, y con tan amplia perspectiva que se le cortó la respiración en maravillada reacción. Luego recordaría el modo en que en aquel preciso momento su percepción le pareció iluminar claramente todo el paisaje a su alrededor, la amplia terraza en la que se hallaba, las otras terrazas, con sus respectivos peldaños más abajo, los jardines, el parque, el lago, los bosques circundantes, como si todo estuviera bajo un sol de medianoche. En el transcurso de estos instantes todo le saltó a la vista como si se tratara de una vasta extensión de descubrimiento, como un mundo que parecía en su luminosidad extraordinariamente nuevo y en el que los objetos familiares hubiesen adquirido un carácter tan vívidamente individualizado que, como si se tratara de una sonora y hablada pretensión a la belleza, al interés, a la importancia, el señor Verver ignoraba a qué, le conferían una desorbitada suma de caracteres y una desorbitada estatura. Esta alucinación, o lo que fuera, fue breve, aunque duró lo suficiente como para dejar al señor Verver con la respiración jadeante. Sin embargo, el jadeo de admiración se había perdido ahora en la intensidad que tan deprisa le sobrevino, ya que la maravilla de lo ocurrido, porque de maravilla se trataba, consistió en la extraña demora de la visión. Durante los días anteriores el señor Verver había buscado y buscado, siempre a tientas, un objeto que se encontraba a sus pies, y que en su ceguera no vio debido a que lo buscaba estúpidamente más allá. Y el objeto que en todo momento había estado junto a él, ahora se encontraba ante su vista.

Tan pronto vio el objeto, todo quedó coherentemente unido. El punto en el que convergía toda aquella luz radicaba en que la totalidad de su futuro como padre consistía en hacer lo preciso para que Maggie se considerase de cada día menos culpable de haberle abandonado. Y no sólo no sería decentemente humano, decentemente posible, no hacer lo preciso para que Maggie gozara fácilmente de semejante alivio, sino que la idea le parecía algo más al señor Verver, ya que le parecía excitante, enaltecedora y causa de inspiración. Además armonizaba de muy bella manera con lo que gracias a esta actitud llegaría a ser factible. La idea estaba allí ante él, enfrentándose con los medios materiales que la convertirían en realidad. Cómo se realizaría esta idea para poder infundir paz en el espíritu de su hija consistía en asegurar el futuro del señor Verver —es decir el futuro de su hija— mediante el matrimonio, mediante un matrimonio que fuera tan excelente, hablando en términos relativos, como el de su hija lo había sido. Mientras aspiraba esta medida de alivio el señor Verver también saboreaba el significado de sus recientes agitaciones. Se daba cuenta de que Charlotte podía ayudar, pero no sabía ver a qué podía ayudar. Cuando todo se aclaró tuvo sencillamente ante su vista el servicio que iba a prestar a su hija en relación con la disponibilidad de su joven amiga, y cuando la fresca oscuridad volvió a envolverle, había alcanzado ya la lucidez moral. Además, ya no era el caso de que la palabra encajara perfectamente, produciendo un clic, con el acertijo, sino que el acertijo encajaba con la palabra en toda su perfección. Bien hubiera podido ser que el señor Verver se hallara en la misma medida necesitado de ayuda y no tuviera a su disposición el remedio. Desde luego, si Charlotte no le aceptaba, el señor Verver se quedaría solo sin arreglo, pero comoquiera que todo encajaba armónicamente bien valía la pena intentar aquella solución. Grande sería el éxito —y éste fue el último latido de entusiasmo del señor Verver— si a la mitad del alivio que Maggie iba a experimentar le acompañaba el efecto producido por la sensación de felicidad que él sentía de momento. Realmente no podía recordar ningún día de su vida en que hubiera tenido más felices pensamientos. Pensar en aquel proyecto, refiriéndolo sólo a sí mismo, habría sido imposible, incluso teniendo en cuenta los sentimientos

últimamente experimentados y reconociendo todos los méritos de aquella situación. Pero se daba la gran diferencia de que pensaba en aquel proyecto refiriéndolo a su hija.

Capítulo XII

Fue en Brighton, sobre todo, donde se manifestó esta diferencia. Durante los tres maravillosos días que el señor Verver pasó allí en compañía de Charlotte, comprendió en buena medida, aunque sin duda no completamente, los méritos de su majestuoso proyecto. Además, para empezar, mientras mantenía su visita en el debido lugar, sosteniendo firmemente con sus manos, como había sostenido a menudo para inspeccionarlo, un viejo y quebradizo búcaro o un cuadro de pátina reluciente, para que estuviera en correcta relación con la luz, las otras presunciones, las que obraban a su favor, las que eran independientes de aquello que él podría aportar, y que, en consecuencia, tendrían carácter ineludiblemente vago hasta el instante en que él «hablara»; esto, decía, esta magnitud parecía multiplicarse a su parecer adquiriendo allí, en el fresco aire de Brighton y en su soleada costa, naturaleza tentadoramente palpable. En este período preliminar, al señor Verver le gustaba tener la impresión de que sabría «hablar» y de que hablaría. La palabra era romántica y para él tenía la virtud de oprimir el resorte que hacía surgir asociaciones con narraciones y obras teatrales en las que apuestos y ardientes jóvenes vestidos de uniforme, con ceñidas calzas, con capas y botas altas, la tenían en sus soliloquios siempre en los labios, y la idea, que tuvo el primer día, de que probablemente tendría que dar el gran paso antes de proceder a dar el segundo, ya le había inducido a decir a su joven amiga que deberían pasar allí más de una o dos noches. Tranquilo en lo referente al terreno que se extendía ante él, el señor Verver tenía el deseo de proceder paso a paso y creía con firmeza que realmente así lo hacía. Reiteradamente se le ocurría el pensamiento de que no actuaba en la oscuridad, sino en la dorada luz de media mañana, no con precipitación, ni agitación, ni frenesí, peligros estos que siempre se encuentran en la senda de la pasión propiamente dicha, sino con la premeditación de un plan proyectado, un plan que quizá no comportara tanta alegría como conlleva la pasión, pero que probablemente, en compensación a esa pérdida, estaba dotado de lo esencial e incluso de la decente dignidad de tener mayor alcance y prever un número más alto de contingencias. La «temporada», como suele decirse, se hallaba en su mejor momento y todos los elementos se conjugaban: el gran hotel azotado por los vientos, el salón de vida social con corrientes de aire, siempre atestado de «tipos», como Charlotte decía sin cesar, y estremecido por los ruidos de una barahúnda en la que la selvática música de las bandas de dorados instrumentos y músicos ataviados espectacularmente, bandas croatas, dálmatas y cárpatas, violentamente exóticas y nostálgicas, luchaban contra el perpetuo sonido del descorche de las botellas. Casi todo ello hubiera desconcertado a nuestros amigos, si no hubiera sido porque predominó la reacción de una alegre sorpresa. La noble intimidad de Fawns les había dejado —por lo menos en el caso del señor Verver— con una acumulada suma de tolerancia con la que absorber las estridencias y los vivos colores de las esferas públicas. El señor Verver, igual que Maggie y Fanny Assingham, había declarado que Fawns se hallaba fuera del mundo, puesto que ahora tenía a su alrededor, en el que incluso el mismísimo mar era un simple medio sonoro de excursiones y de formación de acuarios, le causaba una impresión tan rotunda en el centro de su consciente percepción que nada podía imaginarse más completo en lo tocante a representar el pulso de aquella vida de la que, en el hogar del señor Verver, y después de meditarlo largamente, habían llegado todos a la conclusión de que no debían olvidarla. Este pulso a la vida era lo que Charlotte, a su peculiar manera, había producido últimamente en el hogar del señor Verver, y en las actuales circunstancias había ocasiones en las que dicho señor se consideraba en deuda con ella por su comportamiento, que tenía la

virtud de ponerle en relación con lo que le rodeaba. Diciéndolo con ruda expresión, el señor Verver «se había traído» a Charlotte, pero acaso parecía que fuera ésta quien, con su mayor alegría, su más viva curiosidad e intensidad, su más rápida y más certera ironía, le llevara a él de un lado para otro y le mostrara el lugar. Al pensar en esto se daba cuenta de que en ningún momento de su vida había habido nadie que le hubiera llevado de aquí para allá, pues siempre fue él quien llevó a los otros, principalmente a Maggie. Esto pasó a formar parte rápidamente de una nueva experiencia para el señor Verver, marcando para él, como dirían otras personas con buen tino, una época en su vida, en realidad un nuevo y agradable orden, un halagado estado pasivo que bien podía llegar a ser —¿por qué no?— una de las comodidades del futuro.

El señor Gutermann-Seuss resultó ser, en el segundo día de estancia —ya que nuestro amigo había esperado un día—, un hombre joven, notablemente afable, indudablemente lustroso, que vivía en una casa pequeña y limpia en un barrio alejado del centro marítimo, en el mismísimo seno de su familia, como indicios notorios revelaban. Nuestros visitantes se vieron en la necesidad de entablar amistad, debido a la cercanía, con un numeroso grupo de señoras y señores, viejos y jóvenes, de niños, grandes y pequeños, todos los cuales les produjeron la impresión de estar ungidos para la hospitalidad en no menor grado que su anfitrión, y que, a primera vista, parecían hallarse reunidos para celebrar una fiesta de cumpleaños, un aniversario gregaria o religiosamente observado, aun cuando después cada cual quedó clasificado como miembro de un tranquilo círculo doméstico cuya personalidad quedaba preponderante y directamente determinada por su parentesco con el señor Gutermann-Seuss. Para la mirada de un observador indiferente, éste era simplemente un avispado y resplandeciente joven de menos de treinta veranos, impecablemente ataviado en todos los detalles, que entre su prole —once miembros en total, como confesó el señor Gutermann-Seuss sin pestañear, once caritas morenas con ojos de impersonal mirada flanqueando impersonales narices— agasajaba al gran coleccionista norteamericano a quien durante tanto tiempo había albergado la esperanza de llegar quizá a conocer y cuya encantadora acompañante, la bella, franca, familiar joven señora, con toda probabilidad la señora Verver, se fijaba en el hijo mayor que acababa de obtener su diploma de estudios, se fijaba en las obesas tías con pendientes, se fijaba en los relucientes tíos de aire familiar y anglosajón, de inimitable acento y apostura, con una actitud no tan refinada como la del actual jefe de la firma se fijaba en el lugar y en el tesoro exhibido, se fijaba en todo como si ello fuera una costumbre propia de una persona que sabía explicar en todo momento, gracias a una sabiduría bien adquirida en el curso de la vida, casi todo aquello que producía una impresión «rara». En aquel mismo instante el señor Verver comprendió con toda claridad que aquella libertad de observación de su joven amiga, con la que recogía todo lo que a menudo resultaba divertido con extraordinaria rapidez, imprimiría a partir de aquel momento un cambio para el propio señor Verver, a las experiencias propias de las búsquedas de posibles valiosas piezas de coleccionista, al inquisitivo juego de su aceptada monomanía, cambio que probablemente transformaría la anterior en una más ligera y, en consecuencia, quizá más alborozadamente alegre, forma de deporte. De todas maneras, el señor Verver percibió estos prometedores indicios con suma viveza, cuando el señor Gutermann-Seuss, con una agudeza de percepción que al principio no parecía tener, invitó a la eminente pareja a pasar a otra estancia, ante cuya puerta el resto de la familia vaciló unánimemente y dejó de formar parte de la escena. El tesoro propiamente dicho estaba allí, allí estaban los objetos en cuyos méritos el señor Verver habíase sentido interesado; tales objetos reivindicaron rápidamente el derecho a suscitar la atención de tal caballero, sin embargo, ¿hasta qué punto de su pasado recordaba nuestro amigo, remontándose más y más, a cualquier lugar, pensando mucho menos en mercancías exhibidas ingeniosamente que en otras poco relevantes presencias? Los lugares como aquél no eran sorprendentes para el señor Verver cuando revestían las formas de burguesas salas interiores un tanto siniestras en sus tonos grises y tristes, a la luz del Norte, o de los hogares de falsarios en balnearios, o incluso cuando revestían formas menos, o quizá más, insidiosas. El señor Verver había estado en todas partes, había merodeado y había hurgado en los más diversos lugares; en algunas ocasiones había llegado incluso a arriesgar, creía él, la vida, la salud y la mismísima flor del honor, pero ¿en qué lugar, mientras eran extraídos objetos preciosos uno a uno de a menudo vulgares cajones cerrados con tres llaves o de suaves bolsas de viaje de seda oriental, y dispuestos espectacularmente ante él, había desperdigado conscientemente la atención como hacen las mentes vagas?

No, el señor Verver no dio muestras de lo que le estaba ocurriendo, y esto lo sabía muy bien. Pero inmediatamente advirtió dos cosas, y una de ellas quedó mermada en su dulzura debido a la confusión. Realmente el señor Gutermann-Seuss, en aquel momento culminante, en el momento de mostrar sus cartas,

se comportaba de una manera rara. Era un perfecto maestro en el arte de saber lo que no debía decir a un personaje como el señor Verver, aun cuando la particular importancia de prescindir de las palabras ociosas invistiera sus movimientos, su repetido acto de pasar por entre un impersonal *meublé* de caoba y una mesa tan virtuosamente discreta que incluso parecía notable por el recatado aire que tenía bajo el mantel de algodón de marchito castaño y añil, que sugería recuerdos de patriarcales tés. Los azulejos damascenos, despojados sucesivamente de su envoltorio y mostrados tan tiernamente, se hallaban allí en su pletórica armonía y venerable esplendor, pero el tributo de apreciación y de decisión había quedado reducido hasta tal punto que poco faltaba para que se pudiera calificar de negligencia, tratándose de un hombre que siempre había tenido en cuenta, sin avergonzarse de ello, el intrínseco encanto de lo que se ha dado en llamar comentario y discusión acerca del objeto. El infinitamente antiguo, el inmemorial vidriado azul amatista, sobre el que echar el aliento parecía tan impropio como hacerlo en la mejilla real, esa propiedad del ordenado y armónico despliegue llevaba inevitablemente todo el poder de determinación para el señor Verver, pero la sumisión de éste fue, quizá por primera vez en su vida, adoptada solamente por la rapidez mental, proceso que de todos modos, y a su manera, fue tan armonioso como la perfección recibida y admirada, pero el resto de su ser estaba entregado al conocimiento previo del que dentro de una hora o dos «hablaría». En consecuencia, la quema de sus naves esperaba tan cerca de él que no le permitía dar el debido tratamiento a aquella oportunidad con sus dedos habitualmente firmes y sensibles, quedándose prendado con la predominante personalidad de Charlotte, ante el hecho de que estuviera allí exactamente como estaba, capaz, al igual que también lo era el señor Gutermann-Seuss, de la justa felicidad del silencio, aun cuando con envolvente facilidad, que daba a las aplazadas críticas la fragancia propia del goce prometido a un hombre por su amante o el del ramo de novia pacientemente sostenido a espaldas de la desposada. Sin duda alguna, ésta era la única manera en que el señor Verver podía explicar el que se hubiera sorprendido a sí mismo en el acto de pensar gozosamente en tantas cosas diferentes a la felicidad de su compra y a la elevada cifra consignada en el cheque, y sólo así podía explicar que, después, al regresar a la estancia en la que habían sido anteriormente recibidos, y al recibir de nuevo el agasajo de la tribu, se sintiera totalmente inmerso en el gozoso ambiente formado por la libre reacción de la muchacha ante las colectivas caricias de todos los brillantes ojos y por su afable aceptación de un pedazo de amazacotado pastel y una copa de vino de Oporto que, como luego la propia Charlotte observó, añadió a la transacción el toque final de místico rito de antiguo judaísmo.

Este comentario lo hizo Charlotte cuando los dos se alejaban, caminando junto al atardecer, de vuelta a las orillas del mar acariciado por la brisa, de regreso al bullicio, al rumor y a la agitación, a los esplendentes escaparates que ponían la sonrisa de la oferta en la máscara de la noche. Caminando de esta manera, según la impresión del señor Verver, se acercaban más al lugar en que éste debía quemar sus naves, y entretanto él tenía la certeza de que el rojo resplandor en aquella armoniosa hora daría colorida grandeza a su buena fe. También constituía un síntoma de la clase de sensibilidad que, en ocasiones, se manifestaba en él —aunque tal verdad parezca fabulosa— el que viera un vínculo sentimental, una obligación de delicadeza, o incluso quizá uno de los castigos de lo opuesto, en haber sometido a Charlotte a la luz del Norte, a la correcta, perfecta y dura luz del ámbito de los negocios, de aquella habitación en la que habían estado los dos solos en compañía del tesoro y del propietario del tesoro. Charlotte había prestado atención a la cuantía de la suma que el señor Verver era capaz de mirar cara a cara. Habida cuenta de la relación de intimidad que ya tenía con éste, el hecho de que aceptara sin intervención alguna el estremecimiento que en el aire produjo la alta cifra pagada hirió al señor Verver, desde el mismo instante en que Charlotte protestó tan poco como tan pocas disculpas pidió el señor Verver, de que estaba obligado a hacer una cosa más. Un hombre de decentes sentimientos no se desprende de su dinero, en semejante cantidad y de semejante manera, en presencia de una muchacha pobre, de una muchacha cuya pobreza era, en cierta manera, la base gracias a la cual gozaba de la hospitalidad del señor Verver, sin ver en ello lógicamente una aneja responsabilidad. Y no dejó de seguir siendo así por el hecho de que veinte minutos después, cuando el señor Verver ya había aplicado la antorcha encendida, y lo hizo con uno o dos signos de insistencia, los resultados inmediatos no fueron de claro significado. Estando los dos sentados en un banco apartado, el señor Verver había hablado, había reparado en el curso de sus paseos con Charlotte, que lo había tenido muy presente en su memoria, durante el cuarto de hora que precedió a estos momentos. Sí, aquél era el lugar al que, entre intensas detenciones a más intensos avances, había llevado a Charlotte en constante rumbo. Bajo la solidez del gran acantilado sobre el que se encaramaba arquitectónicamente la ciudad de estuco, con el rumor de la playa y la marea alta y las frías estrellas allá arriba y al frente, dominaba la sensación de serena seguridad

de la población, manifestada en los faroles, en los bancos, en las sillas, en los senderos con losas, sensación que también envolvía en lo alto el apretado barrio de una densa comunidad social que, en aquellos momentos, se disponía una vez más a poner los platos en la mesa.

A mi parecer, hemos gozado juntos de unos días tan dichosos que albergo la esperanza de que no la sorprenderá en exceso que le pregunte si puede usted pensar en mí satisfactoriamente como marido.

Como si el señor Verver hubiera sabido que Charlotte no le contestaría apresuradamente, ya que no podía hacerlo sin perder el grácil carácter de su compostura, o no quería hacerlo, añadió unas cuantas palabras más, igual que si hubiera considerado que éste sería su deber al pensar en aquella escena por anticipado. Ya había formulado la pregunta que no le permitía en manera alguna echarse atrás, y lo que a continuación dijo vino a ser como si de nuevo avivara el fuego para asegurar la llama.

—Lo que acabo de decir no es para mí la expresión de repentinos sentimientos; en ciertos momentos me he preguntado si usted no lo veía venir. He avanzado en esta dirección desde que salimos de Fawns, y aquí he llegado a este punto.

Hablaba despacio, dando a Charlotte tiempo para pensar como él quería. Y con más razón todavía había hablado despacio debido a que Charlotte le miraba fijamente, lo cual producía el efecto, agradándole sobremanera, de favorecer aún más el aspecto de Charlotte, consecuencia importante y, por el momento, dichosa. Charlotte no causaba la más leve impresión de estar sorprendida, sino que el señor Verver, al observarla, la advirtió embargada por una hermosa humildad, de modo que estaba dispuesto a darle cuanto tiempo quisiera.

Dijo:

—No debe usted creer que olvido que no soy joven.

—No, no es eso. La vieja soy yo. Usted es joven.

Ésta fue la primera respuesta de Charlotte, dada en el tono propio de haber esperado el tiempo preciso antes de contestar. Realmente, sus palabras no fueron exacto reflejo de la realidad, pero sí fueron amables, y esto era lo que el señor Verver deseaba principalmente. En las palabras siguientes, Charlotte se mantuvo fiel a la amabilidad sin alterar su voz clara y baja, ni su rostro de franca expresión:

—A mi parecer, estos días han sido verdaderamente dichosos. Difícilmente podría estar agradecida a estos días si, por haber sido como han sido, no nos hubieran llevado, más o menos, a la presente situación.

En cierta manera, el señor Verver tuvo la impresión de que Charlotte mediante estas palabras había avanzado un paso hacia su encuentro, pero que al mismo tiempo no se había movido. Sin embargo, por lo menos significaban, sin la menor duda, que Charlotte pensaba grave y razonablemente, y esto era lo que el señor Verver deseaba que hiciera. Si pensaba lo suficiente, sin duda llegaría a pensar de la manera que a él le convenía. Charlotte prosiguió:

—A mi juicio, es usted quien debe estar seguro de lo que dice.

—Estoy perfectamente seguro. En asuntos importantes, jamás hablo cuando no lo estoy. En consecuencia, si usted es capaz de enfrentarse con la unión de que le he hablado, no debe preocuparse en absoluto.

Una vez más, Charlotte guardó silencio, de manera que causaba la impresión de enfrentarse con aquella perspectiva, mientras a la luz de los faroles y del ocaso, y con la caricia del suave y leve húmedo viento del Sureste, fijaba la mirada sin disimulo en los ojos del señor Verver. Sin embargo, al cabo de otro minuto sólo había meditado hasta el punto de poder decir:

—No voy a pretender hacer creer que yo piense que el casarme no sea una cosa buena, buena para mí, quiero decir.

Hizo una pausa y prosiguió:

—Sí, debido a que estoy terriblemente sola, sin familia. Me gustaría no andar tanto a la deriva. Me gustaría tener uh hogar. Me gustaría tener una vida propia. Me gustaría tener motivos para hacer una cosa en vez de hacer otra, sentirme obligada por algo que no fuera yo misma.

Con tal sinceridad que incluso parecía revelar dolor pero, al mismo tiempo, con tal lucidez que casi representaba sentido del humor, añadió:

—En realidad, y creo que usted lo sabe, quiero casarme… Bueno, es la condición…

En tono vago, el señor Verver preguntó:

—¿La condición?

—Quiero decir el estado. No me gusta mi estado. Ser una «señorita» es terrible, salvo para una dependienta de comercio. No quiero llegar a ser una horrible solterona inglesa.

—Comprendo, quiere que alguien cuide de usted. Pues bien, yo me encargaré de ello.

Sonriendo, Charlotte repuso:

—Pues sí, me atrevo a decir que se trata de eso. Ocurre que no veo por qué razón, a fin de conseguir esto a que me estoy refiriendo, es decir, escapar sencillamente de mi estado, necesito recurrir a algo tan importante.

—¿Algo tan importante como casarse conmigo, quiere decir?

La sonrisa de Charlotte expresaba auténtica franqueza cuando dijo:

—Con menos podría conseguir lo que deseo.

—¿Piensa que soy demasiado para usted?

—Sí, creo que es muchísimo.

Inmediatamente después, el señor Verver tuvo la impresión de que Charlotte se estuviera portando con él con suma dulzura, lo que le indujo a pensar que ya había avanzado un gran trecho en su camino. Pero, luego, de repente, le pareció que allí había algo que no armonizaba, una deficiencia quizá, algo que él no podía concretar, por lo que quedó desorientado sin saber cuál era la posición de los dos. En ese momento, en su conciencia apareció el hecho indiscutible de la disparidad entre uno y otro. Sí, él hubiera podido ser su padre. Entonces dijo:

—Desde luego, esto me perjudica. No soy la persona naturalmente idónea para emparejar con usted, no soy el ser ideal de su juventud y su belleza. Tengo ese inconveniente, además, de que usted siempre me ha visto, cosa natural, bajo otro punto de vista.

Pero Charlotte movió tan lentamente la cabeza que su contradicción fue suave, casi triste, en realidad por tener que ser tan completa; el señor Verver, antes de que Charlotte hablara, ya tuvo vaga conciencia de una objeción, en comparación con la cual la que él había formulado resultaba leve, por lo que la de ella tenía que ser extrañamente profunda. Ésta dijo:

—No me comprende. El problema está en todo lo que usted tiene que hacer. En eso pensaba.

Bueno, en ese caso, no había problema. El señor Verver dijo:

—Pues no siga pensando en eso. Sé perfectamente qué es lo que debo hacer.

Pero ella volvió a negar con un movimiento de cabeza:

—Dudo que lo sepa. Dudo incluso que pueda llegar a saberlo.

—¿Y por qué no? ¿Por qué no, cuando la he conocido toda mi vida? El hecho de que sea viejo comporta por lo menos esta ventaja, la ventaja de conocerla de toda la vida.

Charlotte Stant preguntó:

—¿Cree que me ha «conocido»?

El señor Verver vaciló; el tono de la voz de Charlotte y la expresión de su rostro le habían inducido a dudar. Sin embargo, esto con todo lo demás, juntamente con su firme propósito, con el hecho consumado, con el hermoso resplandor rosado proyectado hacia adelante, en sus barcos, detrás de él, definitivamente ardiendo y resquebrajándose, esto le impulsaría con más fuerza que cualquier advertencia de Charlotte pudiera hacer para contenerle. Además, todo lo que ella era quedaba plenamente iluminado en beneficio del señor Verver por un rosado resplandor. No era un temerario, pero, por ser hombre de bien templado ánimo, no se asustaba fácilmente. Dijo:

—Si acepto lo que usted acaba de decir, ¿acaso no es ello la más poderosa razón que pueda tener para desear saber cómo es usted?

Charlotte, que le había estado mirando en todo momento, como si con ello quisiera manifestar su sinceridad, aunque al mismo tiempo y de extraña manera le pidiera también clemencia, ahora dijo:

—¿Cómo podrá decir que desea saber, cuando antes decía que ya lo sabía?

La frase fue ambigua, y la propia Charlotte vino a reconocerlo al añadir:

—Quiero decir que cuando se trata de saber, a veces se llega a saber cuando ya es demasiado tarde.

El señor Verver contestó con notable rapidez:

—Creo que el hecho de que usted diga estas cosas es causa de que me guste todavía más.

Después de una pausa, añadió:

—Del hecho de que usted me guste debiera usted misma sacar consecuencias provechosas.

—Ya lo hago. Las saco todas. Pero ¿está usted seguro de haber utilizado todos los restantes medios?

Realmente estas palabras dejaron al señor Verver con la mirada un tanto desorbitada:

—¿A qué otros medios se refiere?

—Usted tiene muchos más medios para ser amable que cualquier persona que yo haya conocido en mi

vida.

—En ese caso, estime que pongo todos mis medios a su disposición.

Charlotte le miró largamente, como si con ello quisiera hacer lo preciso para que el señor Verver no pudiera decir que no le había dado tiempo o que Charlotte había retirado de su vista una sola pulgada de su apariencia. Ésta, por lo menos, estaba plenamente visible. La figura de Charlotte parecía representar un ser extrañamente consciente, lo cual afectaba al señor Verver, aunque en un sentido que difícilmente podía determinar, pero del que sí sabía que suscitaba en él, en líneas generales, el sentimiento de la admiración. El señor Verver dijo:

—Está usted dotada de una honradez absolutamente impecable.

—Ésta es la manera en que quiero comportarme.

Después de decir estas palabras, Charlotte añadió:

—No comprendo por qué encuentra usted a faltar algo. No comprendo por qué no es usted feliz tal como está.

Después de una pausa, prosiguió:

—No puedo preguntarme a mí misma, ni puedo preguntarle a usted, si realmente goza de tanta libertad como su universal generosidad induce a creer. ¿No deberíamos pensar un poco en los demás? ¿No deberíamos, por un deber de lealtad, o al menos de delicadeza, pensar en Maggie?

Después de estas palabras, con tensa dulzura, como si no quisiera causar la impresión de que estaba dándole lecciones de deber, explicó:

—Maggie lo es todo para usted, siempre lo ha sido. ¿Está seguro de que en su vida hay sitio para otra…?

—¿Para otra hija? ¿Es eso lo que quería decir?

Charlotte, al dejar inacabada la frase, por poco tiempo dejó la conversación interrumpida, ya que el señor Verver se apresuró a hacer la pregunta antes consignada. De todas maneras, no desconcertó a Charlotte Stant, quien replicó:

—Para otra mujer joven, de una edad muy parecida a la de Maggie, con quien ha tenido siempre una relación muy diferente a aquella que con ella tendría si usted y yo nos casáramos. Para otra compañera.

Casi con fiereza, el señor Verver preguntó:

—¿Es que un hombre no puede ser, en toda su vida, otra cosa que padre?

Pero sin darle tiempo para contestar prosiguió:

—Habla usted de cambios, pero esos cambios ya se han dado, y eso nadie lo sabe mejor que Maggie. Tiene plena conciencia del cambio que produjo con su matrimonio. Del cambio que ello comportó, en lo que a mí respecta, quiero decir. Piensa constantemente en ello. Este pensamiento no le permite vivir en paz ni un momento.

Después de una pausa, el señor Verver explicó:

—En consecuencia, lo que intento es poner en paz el espíritu de Maggie con usted. Solo no puedo hacerlo, pero con la ayuda de usted, sí. Usted puede conseguir que Maggie vuelva a ser feliz, en cuanto a mí se refiere.

Pensativa, Charlotte dijo:

—¿En cuanto a usted se refiere? Pero ¿qué puedo hacer yo, en cuanto a Maggie concierne?

—Bueno, si Maggie está tranquila respecto a mí, todo lo demás se dará por añadidura. El caso está en sus manos, Charlotte. Usted puede quitar de su cabeza la idea de que me ha abandonado.

Ciertamente se podría calificar de interés aquello con lo que el señor Verver había conseguido iluminar la cara de Charlotte, que resaltaba todavía más la honradez de la joven, pues tal interés se centraba ahora en enterarse de los distintos pasos por los que el señor Verver había llegado a convencerse. Charlotte preguntó:

—Si usted se ha sentido atraído por una persona como yo, ¿no revela eso que realmente se sentía abandonado?

—Bueno, estoy dispuesto a reconocerlo si al mismo tiempo se acepta que me siento consolado.

Charlotte preguntó:

—Pero ¿realmente se ha sentido así?

Él vaciló:

—¿Consolado?

—No, abandonado.

—No, no me he sentido abandonado. Pero eso es lo que Maggie piensa.

Con estas palabras vino a decir que bastaba con que Maggie tuviera ese pensamiento. Sin embargo, esta explicación de sus motivos le pareció en el mismo instante quizá un tanto débil, por lo que decidió matizarla un poco:

—Y caso de que esto sea lo que yo pienso, resulta que me gusta el resultado final de mi pensamiento.

—Es muy hermoso, es maravilloso, pero ¿no cabe la posibilidad de que no sea razón suficiente para contraer matrimonio conmigo?

—¿Y por qué no ha de ser suficiente, hija mía? ¿Acaso el pensamiento de un hombre no es lo que normalmente decide su matrimonio?

Al meditar estas palabras, Charlotte causó la impresión de que quizá la cuestión planteada era de excesiva magnitud o, por lo menos, una ampliación del asunto del que estaban tratando. Dijo:

—¿No depende mucho de la clase de matrimonio de que se trate?

Charlotte había dicho estas palabras para indicar que los pensamientos y las ideas acerca del matrimonio pueden variar, después de lo cual, sin embargo, y sin apenas hacer una pausa, abordó otra cuestión:

—¿No cree que me ha hablado de una manera que parece que yo tenga que considerar su oferta pensando en Maggie? De todas las maneras, no creo que ella se tranquilice al aceptar yo su propuesta, ni tampoco creo que necesite tranquilizarse.

—¿Cree usted que no significa nada el que Maggie se mostrara tan dispuesta a dejarnos solos?

¡No, no, al contrario, para Charlotte aquello tenía un gran significado!

—Maggie se mostró dispuesta porque tenía que estarlo. Desde el instante en que el Príncipe manifestó sus deseos de irse, lo único que Maggie podía hacer era acompañarle.

—Perfectamente, de modo y manera que, si usted acepta, Maggie podrá «acompañar al Príncipe» en el futuro siempre que quiera.

Charlotte meditó unos instantes como si analizara en interés de Maggie el privilegio anunciado por el señor Verver, y el análisis dio lugar a una modesta concesión:

—¡Desde luego, ha trazado usted bien sus planes!

—Naturalmente, esto es exactamente lo que he hecho. Durante mucho tiempo, nada ha habido en la vida de Maggie que la haya hecho tan feliz como el que usted se quedara aquí conmigo.

—Debía quedarme con usted para que Maggie se fuera tranquila.

Adam Verver comentó con voz recia:

—Efectivamente, gracias a eso se ha ido tranquila. Y si lo pone en duda, lo único que tiene que hacer es preguntárselo.

Sorprendida, la muchacha dijo:

—¿Preguntárselo? ¿A Maggie?

—Exactamente. Y añada que se lo pregunta porque no cree lo que yo le digo.

Charlotte se resistió:

—¿Quiere decir que le escriba una carta preguntándoselo? —Ni más ni menos. Inmediatamente. Mañana mismo. Charlotte Stant dijo:

—No creo que pueda escribirle en ese sentido.

Divertida por la diferencia de matiz que expresaba con sus palabras, añadió:

—Cuando le escribo, le hablo del apetito del Principino y de las visitas del doctor Brady.

—Bueno, pues en ese caso pregúnteselo cara a cara. Iremos a París y allí nos reuniremos con ellos.

Al oír estas palabras, Charlotte se levantó con un movimiento que fue como un grito. Pero el sentido que expresó sin palabras quedó anulado mientras la muchacha estaba en pie con la vista fija en el señor Verver, que todavía seguía sentado, como si quisiera que esta posición le ayudara un poco a impulsar su petición hacia lo alto. Sin embargo, en estos instantes una nueva impresión dominaba el ánimo de Charlotte, quien cubrió amablemente al señor Verver con sus palabras:

—Realmente creo que le gusto.

Adam Verver repuso:

—Muchas gracias. ¿Formulará personalmente a Maggie la pregunta que le he dicho?

Charlotte volvió a vacilar:

—¿Quiere usted decir yendo los dos a París para reunirnos con ellos? —Sí, tan pronto como podamos regresar a Fawns. Y les esperaremos el tiempo que sea necesario hasta que se reúnan con nosotros.

—¿Les esperaremos en Fawns?

—En París. Será una estancia muy agradable.

—Me lleva usted a lugares muy agradables y me hace proposiciones maravillosas.

—Es usted quien da carácter agradable a los lugares. ¡Incluso Brighton!

Casi con ternura, Charlotte protestó:

—Y en estos momentos, ¿qué es lo que transformo en agradable?

—Me ha prometido lo que yo deseaba que me prometiera.

Poniéndose en pie, insistió:

—¿Acaso no me ha prometido comportarse de acuerdo con lo que Maggie le diga?

Pero Charlotte quería saber más:

—¿Quiere decir que Maggie me pedirá lo mismo que usted?

Estas palabras le dieron, como si se tratara de una transmisión de pensamiento, la impresión de que lo correcto era estar seguro. Pero ¿realmente estaba seguro? El señor Verver dijo:

—Maggie hablará con usted y hablará por mí.

Estas palabras, por fin, parecieron dejarla satisfecha:

—Muy bien. ¿Está de acuerdo en que no volvamos a tratar de este asunto hasta que Maggie haya hablado conmigo?

El señor Verver, con las manos metidas en los bolsillos del pantalón y los hombros expresivamente alzados, daba muestras de cierto desencanto. Sin embargo, poco tardó en recuperar totalmente su amabilidad, y su paciencia fue ejemplar. Sonriendo, dijo:

—Desde luego, le daré tiempo. Especialmente si tenemos en cuenta que será tiempo que usted pasará en mi compañía. Seguir juntos quizá le permita ver con claridad. Quiero decir, ver lo mucho que la necesito.

—Por el momento, ya veo claramente que usted se ha convencido de ello.

Dichas estas palabras, Charlotte tuvo que insistir en algo que ya había dicho anteriormente:

—Pero, por desdicha, no todo estriba en eso.

—En este caso, ¿cómo conseguirá usted que Maggie quede satisfecha?

Como si la palabra tuviera muy largo alcance, Charlotte repitió:

—¿Satisfecha?

Y en tono aún crítico, exclamó en un murmullo:

—¡Oh…!

Y los dos emprendieron el camino de regreso.

Capítulo XIII

Una semana después, hallándose ya en París, Adam Verver habló a Charlotte una vez más de aquella espera, aunque el ejercicio de la paciencia no fue doloroso para él. Había escrito a su hija, y no desde Brighton, sino inmediatamente después de haber regresado a Fawns, en donde sólo pasaron cuarenta y ocho horas, para emprender luego su viaje. La contestación de Maggie a la carta de su padre fue un telegrama remitido desde Roma que entregaron al señor Verver al mediodía de su cuarta jornada de estancia en París, telegrama que hizo llegar a Charlotte, quien se encontraba sentada en aquellos momentos en el salón del hotel, en donde habían acordado reunirse para ir a almorzar juntos. La carta que el señor Verver escribió en Fawns —carta de varias páginas, escrita con lúcida y casi triunfal intención de informar sin reserva alguna— no dio resultado cuando puso manos a la obra, y no sin cierta sorpresa por su parte; el documento era de fácil redacción, incluso teniendo en cuenta lo que, a este respecto, su clara conciencia de la importancia del texto le había inducido a suponer. Sin embargo, debido totalmente a razones que se hallaban latentes de forma natural en aquel acervo de percepciones, incorporó al mensaje una parte de la impaciencia que sentía. Por el momento, el principal resultado de la conversación antes reseñada había consistido en cierto cambio en la actitud del señor Verver en relación con su joven amiga, así como cierto cambio, igualmente perceptible, en la actitud de Charlotte con respecto a él. Y todo a pesar de que el señor Verver no había renovado su empeño de «hablar» con Charlotte, ni siquiera para decirle que había despachado su misiva a Roma. La delicadeza, una delicadeza todavía más hermosa, toda la delicadeza que Charlotte pudiera desear, imperaba en la relación entre los dos, por ser lógico que en su actual situación, Charlotte no tuviera mayores motivos de preocupación hasta el momento en que Maggie la hubiera tranquilizado.

Sin embargo, fue precisamente en París —ciudad que representó para ellos algo parecido a un Brighton multiplicado por mil— donde la delicadeza creó entre el señor Verver y su amiga la tensión, la sensación de expectativa, lo que él habría accedido a denominar provisional peculiaridad de sus presentes circunstancias. Estos elementos ejercían su propia acción, imponiendo y comportando, bajo un mismo título, buen número de abstenciones y precauciones, abundantes ansiedades y prevenciones, todo lo cual el señor Verver no habría sabido cómo expresar pero que, en todo momento, imponía a los dos una aceptación de su realidad presente. El señor Verver esperaba en compañía de Charlotte que otra persona viniera en su ayuda, a pesar de que, por lo que ya había ocurrido, los dos se hallaban en una situación que la capacidad de otra persona no podía atenuar ni agravar. Sobre esta base, los comunes convencionalismos —y esto era lo raro— merecían mayor atención, y se trataba precisamente de los convencionalismos que, antes de la conversación en el paseo de Brighton, el señor Verver había olvidado con gran placer por su parte. La explicación se hallaba, suponía el señor Verver —o así lo habría imaginado si no se hubiese sentido tan inquieto—, en que París, a su manera, emitía voces y advertencias más profundas, de modo que, si uno se descuidaba un poco, por todas partes se abrían trampas que la vista percibía cubiertas de flores, invitando a más y mayores descuidos. En el aire se insinuaban extrañas formas y cabía la posibilidad de que uno se uniera a ellas antes de que se diera cuenta. Como el señor Verver no quería unirse a ninguna forma, sino sólo revestirse de la de un caballero dispuesto a jugar con perfecta limpieza todos los juegos que en la vida tuviera que jugar, se descubrió a sí mismo al recibir el mensaje de Maggie, alborozándose, no sin cierta incongruencia. La comunicación que el señor Verver dirigió a su hija le había costado, en el momento de redactarla, el que su

propia pluma le pinchara dolorosamente diversas partes de su persona —su personal pudor, la imagen que él tenía del estado de preparación en que su hija se encontraba para tan súbito cambio, y muchas otras—, y quizá por esto ansiaba que la demora se redujera y que se produjeran las rápidas transiciones que la inminente llegada de la pareja prometía. A fin de cuentas, cierto matiz ofensivo había en el hecho de que un hombre de su edad tuviera que estar pendiente de ajena aprobación. Desde luego, Maggie estaba tan lejos como Charlotte de desear que esta situación se produjera y, por su parte, Charlotte estaba tan lejos como Maggie de tratar a la ligera el valor real que el señor Verver tenía de sí mismo. En resumen, el generoso rigor de conciencia de su pobre hija tenía nervioso al señor Verver.

De todas maneras, estas vacilaciones espirituales del señor Verver iban emparejadas con la gran alegría que experimentó al avistar el final de aquella dura prueba que significaba el final del período en el que parecía aceptar que las dudas y los interrogantes eran pertinentes. Cuanto más pensaba en la cuestión, más convencido estaba de que en verdad aquellas dudas e interrogantes solamente eran feos. Ahora estimaba que habría soportado mucho mejor que Charlotte le hubiera dicho con toda sencillez que él no le gustaba. Desde luego, no se habría alegrado, ni mucho menos, pero lo habría comprendido perfectamente y, a regañadientes, lo habría aceptado. Pero el señor Verver gustaba a Charlotte, ya que nada había dicho o hecho Charlotte que negara lo anterior, con lo cual el señor Verver se sentía inquieto no sólo en lo que le concernía a él mismo sino también en lo que afectaba a su joven amiga. Charlotte le miró fijamente en el momento en que le entregó el telegrama que había recibido; esta mirada, por el oscuro y tímido temor que el señor Verver imaginó había en ella, le proporcionó quizá el mejor momento de convencimiento de que, como hombre, realmente gustaba a la muchacha. Él nada dijo, por cuanto las palabras del telegrama expresaban más de lo que habría podido decir, y quedaron todavía mayormente realzadas cuando Charlotte, que se había levantado al ver que el señor Verver se le acercaba, las leyó en un murmullo:

—«Emprendemos viaje esta noche para aportaros todo nuestro amor, alegría y comprensión».

Allí estaban las palabras. ¿Qué más quería Charlotte? Sin embargo, al devolverle la hojita desplegada, no dijo que fueran suficientes, y al instante advirtió que el silencio de Charlotte probablemente no era ajeno al hecho de haber palidecido visiblemente. Sus ojos extremadamente bellos, como el señor Verver aseguraba que los había considerado siempre, resplandecían al mirarle con un color todavía más oscuro al contrastar con la palidez de la cara y, con ello, Charlotte había adoptado una vez más su evidente manera de someterse, gracias a una explícita honestidad y a su voluntad de tratar cara a cara con el señor Verver, al juicio que él se formara con toda libertad, incluso con rudeza, de la impresión que le causara a él. Tan pronto se dio cuenta de que la emoción era lo que la tenía reducida al silencio, advirtió también que estaba profundamente conmovido, pues ello demostraba que, a pesar de que Charlotte se había abstenido de manifestarlo, había aguardado albergando hermosas esperanzas. Quedaron así en silencio durante unos instantes, mientras el señor Verver se daba cuenta, por el signo antes dicho, de que ciertamente gustaba a Charlotte lo suficiente, gustábale lo bastante como para, a pesar de estar siempre presto a calificarse de viejo, hacerle experimentar una sensación de placer.

Este placer determinó que fuera el primero en hablar.

—¿Comienza a convencerse, aunque sólo sea un poco?

A pesar de todo, Charlotte aún tenía problemas en qué pensar:

—¿Lo ve? Hemos turbado su paz. ¿A santo de qué ponerse en marcha así, tan precipitadamente?

Adam Verver dijo:

—Porque quieren felicitarnos, quieren contemplar nuestra dicha.

Charlotte volvió a meditar, en esta ocasión también y desde el punto de vista del señor Verver, del modo más evidente posible, y, por fin, Charlotte dijo:

—¿Hasta ese punto se han impresionado?

—¿Le parece demasiado?

Charlotte siguió pensando en voz alta:

—Tendrían que haberse quedado una semana más.

—Bueno, ¿y qué? ¿Acaso nuestra situación actual no merece este pequeño sacrificio? Tan pronto como usted lo desee iremos a Roma con ellos.

Estas palabras parecieron tener el efecto de frenar a la muchacha, tal como el señor Verver la había visto frenada anteriormente, y un poco inescrutable, por sus alusiones a lo que podrían hacer juntos en tal o cual ocasión. Charlotte dijo:

—¿Y quién se beneficia de este merecido pequeño sacrificio? Nosotros, naturalmente. Queremos verlos

por nuestras propias razones. Esbozó una vaga sonrisa y añadió:

—Mejor dicho, por las razones de usted.

Valerosamente, el señor Verver declaró:

—¡Y usted también desea verlos, querida!

Después de unos instantes, Charlotte reconoció con harta espontaneidad:

—Es cierto, también yo quisiera verlos. Sin embargo, para nosotros algo depende de esta visita.

—Y tanto… Pero no es menos cierto que no se puede decir que para ellos no dependa nada de esta visita.

—¿Qué es lo que puede depender de esta visita para ellos, cuando es evidente que no quieren contrariarnos? Esto es lo que me pregunto. Comprendería que se apresuraran a venir con el fin de evitar nuestras posibles decisiones. Pero ese entusiasmo que tan poco puede esperar, esa intensa ansia, confieso queme intriga un poco.

Después de una pausa, Charlotte añadió:

—Quizá me considere suspicaz y poco considerada, pero estimo que el Príncipe no puede desear venir tan pronto. El Príncipe ansiaba intensamente irse.

Después de pensar, el señor Verver observó:

—¿Acaso no se fue y no ha estado fuera?

—Sí, pero sólo el tiempo preciso para comenzar a disfrutar de su viaje. Además, puede muy bien darse el caso de que el Príncipe no coincida con el optimista parecer que nuestra situación merece a Maggie, según usted. Es muy posible que, hasta el momento, el Príncipe no haya considerado como una posibilidad normal y corriente el que usted diera a su esposa una flamante madrastra.

Al escuchar estas palabras, Adam Verver adoptó una expresión grave y dijo:

—En ese caso, mucho me temo que el Príncipe tendrá que aceptar de nosotros lo que su esposa acepte; y tendrá que aceptarlo si es que carece de la capacidad precisa para hallar otras razones, debido precisamente a que ella lo acepta.

Para terminar, añadió:

—Para él, con eso basta y sobra.

El tono en que el señor Verver había hablado indujo a Charlotte a mirarle directamente a los ojos, después de lo cual dijo en tono brusco:

—Déjeme verlo otra vez.

Y cogió la hoja doblada que había devuelto al señor Verver y que éste conservaba en la mano. Después de leer de nuevo el texto, dijo:

—¿No será para ellos una manera como cualquier otra de ganar tiempo?

Una vez más, el señor Verver se quedó mirándola en silencio pero, en el mismo instante, después de aquel encogerse de hombros y de aquella presión descendente en sus bolsillos, que Charlotte ya había provocado más de una vez en momentos de desconcierto, dio bruscamente media vuelta sobre sí mismo y se alejó de ella en silencio. En su leve desesperación, el señor Verver miró alrededor, cruzó el salón del hotel: con arcos en lo alto, vidrios esmerilados, protegido contra los ruidos estridentes, resguardado de las imágenes desagradables, caliente, con dorados, con cortinajes, casi íntegramente alfombrado, con árboles exóticos en macetas, con exóticas señoras en sillas, que titubeaban al hablar, que decían barbarismos como si tuvieran las alas plegadas o estuvieran aleteando muy levemente en la superior, la suprema, la inexorable envoltura del ambiente parisino, que semejaba un recinto de crítica importancia y gran capacidad, una sala de espera odontológica, médica, quirúrgica, un escenario de ansiedad y deseo mezclados, de carácter preparatorio para los bárbaros allí reunidos para la necesaria amputación o extracción de las excrecencias y redundancias de la barbarie. El señor Verver llegó a la *porte cochère*, se aconsejó de nuevo con su habitual optimismo, que aquí, por ignoradas razones, quedó agudizado por el aire fresco inhalado, y regresó sonriente junto a Charlotte.

—¿Le parece a usted increíble que cuando un hombre esté tan enamorado como Americo todavía lo está, su más natural impulso sea sentir lo que su esposa siente, creer lo que ella cree, desear lo que ella desea, desde luego, siempre y cuando no haya una razón especial que lo impida?

Este modo de hablar fue eficaz. Charlotte reconoció prontamente esa natural posibilidad:

—Para mí nada es increíble respecto a personas inmensamente enamoradas.

—¿Acaso Americo no está inmensamente enamorado?

Charlotte dudó, pero sólo para hallar la correcta expresión del grado, aunque a fin de cuentas, adoptó la

palabra del señor Verver:

—Inmensamente.

—¡Pues eso es todo!

Sin embargo, Charlotte esbozó de nuevo una sonrisa. No, todavía no estaba plenamente de acuerdo:

—No, no es todo.

—¿Qué más quiere?

—Es preciso que la esposa del Príncipe consiga hacerle creer realmente lo que ella realmente cree.

Después de estas palabras, Charlotte prosiguió con mayor lucidez lógica todavía:

—La realidad de lo que el Príncipe crea depende, en este caso, de la realidad de lo que Maggie crea. Por ejemplo, ahora el Príncipe quizá haya quedado convencido de que Maggie posiblemente desea abundar en el parecer de usted, sea cual fuere. Quizá el Príncipe recuerde que ésta ha sido siempre la actitud de Maggie.

A estas palabras Adam Verver repuso:

—Muy bien, ¿y qué hecho inducirá al Príncipe a tener cautela en semejante examen? ¿A qué catástrofe, que el Príncipe pueda recordar, ha llevado tal disposición de ánimo a Maggie?

—¡A ésta, precisamente!

Estas palabras hicieron de que, a la vista del señor Verver, Charlotte se alzara más erguida y diáfana que en cualquier momento anterior.

El señor Verver preguntó:

—¿Nuestro pequeño problema tal como se encuentra en la actualidad?

En realidad, el aspecto de Charlotte en estos instantes le produjo tal efecto que sólo pudo reaccionar con maravillosa dulzura. Entonces el señor Verver volvió a hablar:

—¿No cree que debiéramos esperar un poquito antes de calificar de catástrofe nuestra situación?

La respuesta de Charlotte a estas palabras fue precisamente esperar, pero no durante el largo período que las palabras del señor Verver implicaban. Sin embargo, cuando por fin habló, también lo hizo con dulzura:

—¿Y qué es lo que quiere usted esperar, mi querido amigo?

Esta pregunta quedó en el aire suspendida entre los dos, e intercambiaron una mirada que bien habría podido dar a cada uno de ellos la apariencia de buscar en el otro los síntomas de su clara ironía. Estos síntomas quedaron inmediatamente tan manifiestos en el rostro del señor Verver, que indujeron a Charlotte, como si estuviera avergonzada de haberlos producido de manera tan marcada, y también como si hubiera sido obligada, bajo presiones, a manifestar algo que había mantenido oculto hasta el momento, a saltar bruscamente al terreno de un puro y simple razonamiento.

—Usted no ha reparado en ello, pero yo no he podido dejar de darme cuenta de que, a pesar de lo que usted presume, de lo que nosotros presumimos si así lo prefiere, Maggie sólo le ha comunicado a usted con su telegrama su alegría. No me ha dirigido a mí expresión alguna de su rebosante gozo.

Charlotte no dejaba de tener razón; el señor Verver, perdida la mirada durante unos instantes, meditó aquellas palabras. Pero, al igual que antes, recurrió a su presencia de ánimo por no hablar ya de su amable sentido del humor.

—¡Se queja usted precisamente de lo que es más encantadoramente concluyente! Maggie ya nos trata como si fuéramos una sola persona.

Charlotte, a pesar de su lógica y de su lucidez, quedó afectada por la manera en que el señor Verver decía en ciertas ocasiones las cosas. Le miró con el intenso deseo de complacerle, y sus palabras expresaron lisa y llanamente sus sentimientos:

—Quiero que sepa que me gusta, me gusta mucho.

¿Y qué efecto podían producir estas palabras sino el de estimular el sentido del humor del señor Verver?

—Ahora comprendo lo que pasa, mi querida amiga. No estará usted tranquila hasta que haya oído lo que el Príncipe tenga que decir. Y aquel hombre feliz añadió:

—Me parece que mandaré en secreto un telegrama al Príncipe, con la contestación pagada, diciéndole que usted desea que le mande unas cuantas palabras.

Esto produjo el efecto de ensanchar más la sonrisa de Charlotte:

—¿Cuál es la respuesta que pagará, la del Príncipe o la mía?

—Desde luego, pagaré con sumo gusto la respuesta que usted desee mandar con todas las palabras que quiera.

Y, para que su generosidad no quedara limitada, el señor Verver añadió:

—Tampoco le pediré que me enseñe su mensaje.

Al parecer, Charlotte aceptó la oferta al pie de la letra, puesto que preguntó:

—¿Y tampoco me pedirá leer el telegrama del Príncipe?

—Tampoco. Podrá mantenerlo en secreto.

Sin embargo, al escuchar las palabras del señor Verver, como si en ellas hubiera insinuado que en aquella cuestión había un verdadero problema, Charlotte pareció considerar que, aunque sólo fuera por razones de buen gusto, la broma había llegado bastante lejos. Dijo:

—Carece de importancia. ¡A no ser que el Príncipe hable por sí mismo! De todas maneras, ¿cómo se le va a ocurrir hablar por sí mismo?

El señor Verver se mostró de acuerdo:

—Estoy convencido de que no lo hará. El Príncipe ignora que es usted morbosa.

Después de meditar brevemente, Charlotte manifestó su asenso:

—No, todavía no lo ha descubierto. Quizá algún día lo descubra, pero, por el momento, aún no ha reparado en ello. Entre tanto, prefiero considerarle inocente.

Con estas palabras la situación quedó aclarada, en opinión de Charlotte, y así hubiera seguido si ella no hubiera incurrido inmediatamente en una de sus reacciones de inquietud:

—Sin embargo, Maggie sabe que soy morbosa y no puede beneficiarse del principio según el cual todos somos inocentes mientras no se demuestre lo contrario.

Por fin, un poco fatigado, Adam Verver observó:

—Bueno, me parece que también Maggie le dirá algo.

A consecuencia de las reiteradas alusiones, el señor Verver tenía ahora la clara impresión de que la omisión de Maggie realmente era sorprendente. A lo largo de toda su vida Maggie jamás había estado en un error durante más de tres minutos.

Un instante después, Charlotte advirtió de forma un tanto extraña:

—Bueno, la verdad es que no me considero con derecho a exigir que Maggie se dirija a mí.

Esta observación tuvo la virtud de reafirmar la impresión del señor Verver a la que acabamos de referirnos. Dijo:

—Me gustaría mucho que lo hiciera.

Ante estas palabras, Charlotte, como inducida por la manera constante en que el señor Verver —y más o menos en contra de sus propias afirmaciones— acababa por darle la razón, demostró que también ella podía siempre, y con no menos amabilidad, recorrer la mitad de la distancia que mediaba entre los dos:

—Solamente me he referido a la falta de una gentil consideración, esa gentil consideración que concurre en todo cuanto Maggie hace. No tengo derecho a ella, pero aceptando lo que usted ha dicho, en el sentido de que aún podemos esperarla, será conmovedora. Será muy hermosa.

Después de mirar el reloj, el señor Verver dijo:

—Vayamos a almorzar. Cuando regresemos, encontraremos aquí el mensaje que esperamos.

Charlotte, sonriente, mientras buscaba con la mirada la boa de plumas con la que había bajado de su aposento, advirtió:

—Y si no ha llegado, sólo se le podrá imputar al mensaje este levísimo defecto.

El señor Verver vio la boa de Charlotte en el brazo de la silla de donde ésta se había alzado al llegar él, la cogió y la levantó de manera que su encantadora suavidad le rozara la cara —se trataba de un maravilloso producto de París, comprado bajo su entendida mirada el día anterior—, y la mantuvo en esa posición unos instantes, antes de entregarla a Charlotte, a quien dijo:

—¿Me promete estar tranquila?

Mientras meditaba, Charlotte mantuvo la vista fija en el admirable regalo del señor Verver. Por fin dijo:

—Se lo prometo.

—¿En todo momento?

—En todo momento.

Para encontrar más justificada su petición, advirtió:

—Y debe usted recordar que, cuando Maggie le mande el telegrama, de una forma natural hablará más por cuenta de su marido de lo que lo hizo al mandármelo a mí.

Sólo unas cuantas palabras suscitaron dudas en Charlotte:

—¿De una forma natural?

—Desde luego. Nuestro matrimonio coloca al Príncipe, con respecto a usted, o a usted con respecto al Príncipe, en una relación nueva, en tanto que la relación del Príncipe conmigo queda igual. En consecuencia, nuestro matrimonio es motivo de que el Príncipe tenga más cosas que decirle a usted que a mí.

—¿Acerca de que este matrimonio me convertirá en su madrastra política o como quiera que sea que se llame?

Un tanto divertida, Charlotte meditó sus propias palabras, y añadió:

—Sí, es natural que un caballero tenga algo —que decir a una mujer joven a este respecto.

El señor Verver dijo:

—Bueno, Americo siempre sabe comportarse, según el caso, de la manera más divertida o de la manera más seria que quepa desear, y sea cual fuere el talante que adopte con respecto a usted al mandarle su mensaje, esa manera será rotunda en uno u otro sentido.

Y como quiera que la muchacha dirigió al señor Verver una de sus profundas, extrañas y, al mismo tiempo, tiernas miradas críticas, y se abstuvo de hacer comentario alguno, el señor Verver se sintió impulsado por una vaga ansiedad a formularle una pregunta:

—¿Verdad que el Príncipe es un hombre encantador?

Charlotte Stant repuso:

—Ciertamente encantador. Si no lo fuera, poco me importaría su comportamiento.

En justa armonía, su amigo declaró:

—¡Y tampoco a mí!

—Pero es que a usted no le importa. No tiene por qué importarle. Bueno, quiero decir que no tiene por qué importarle como a mí me importa. Es el último grado de insensatez: preocuparse angustiosamente, hasta dar la última partícula, por lo que uno está obligado a dar.

Guardó silencio unos instantes y prosiguió:

—Si yo estuviera en su lugar, si en mi vida tuviera, en lo tocante a felicidad, poderío y paz, siquiera una pequeña parte de lo que usted tiene, sería preciso que ocurriera algo tremendamente importante para que llegara a preocuparme. Ocurriera lo que ocurriese en el mundo, por nada me preocuparía, salvo por aquello que afectara a mi suerte.

El señor Verver repuso:

—La comprendo muy bien, pero todo depende de lo que usted entienda por «suerte», por la suerte de cada cual. Yen estos momentos estoy hablando precisamente de mi suerte. Será todo lo sublime que usted quiera tan pronto como usted me haya colocado en mi sitio. Solamente cuando uno se encuentra en su sitio tiene todo eso a que usted se ha referido.

El señor Verver aclaró sus palabras:

—No son las cosas de que usted ha hablado las que le ponen a uno en su sitio, sino que es esa otra cosa que yo deseo lo que pone las otras en su sitio. Si usted me da lo que le pido, lo verá.

Charlotte cogió la boa y se la echó sobre los hombros y, mientras meditaba, apartó la mirada del señor Verver y la fijó en algo que había atraído su interés, a pesar de que a esa hora, hora de la dispersión suscitada por el almuerzo, el salón había quedado tan abandonado que estaba totalmente a su disposición, y en él hubiera podido hablar con absoluta libertad, incluso en el caso de ser propensos a conversar a gritos. Charlotte estaba ya dispuesta a salir en compañía del señor Verver, pero había reparado en la presencia de un jovenzuelo vestido de uniforme, emisario evidente de la oficina de *Postes et Télégraphes*, que, procedente de la calle, se había acercado a la pequeña fortaleza defendida por la *concierge*, a la que ofreció una misiva que había extraído de la pequeña cartera que llevaba colgada al hombro. La empleada, que había recibido al emisario en el vestíbulo, advirtió que, en el otro extremo del salón, Charlotte prestaba marcada atención a aquella visita, por lo que, segundos después, la empleada avanzó hacia nuestros amigos, con las cintas de la cofia al viento, y una sonrisa de notificación tan ancha como su delantal blanco. Alzó la mano con la que sostenía el mensaje telegráfico y, en el momento de entregarlo, advirtió:

—*Cette fois-ci, pour Madame*!

Después de lo cual se retiró con idéntica afabilidad, dejando a Charlotte en posesión de lo entregado. La joven sostuvo unos momentos el telegrama en la mano sin abrirlo. Los ojos de Charlotte estaban ahora fijos en su compañero, quien, inmediatamente, recibió en tono triunfal el mensaje:

—¡Aquí está!

En silencio, Charlotte abrió el telegrama y, tal como hizo con el que anteriormente le entregara el señor

Verver, estudió durante un minuto su contenido sin expresión en el rostro. El señor Verver la contempló en silencio, sin formularle pregunta alguna. Por fin, Charlotte alzó la vista y dijo:

—Le daré lo que me ha pedido.

La expresión del rostro de Charlotte era rara, pero ¿cuándo una mujer no ha tenido el derecho de ser rara en los momentos de su suprema entrega? El señor Verver aceptó la expresión de Charlotte con agradecido silencio y con una larga mirada, de manera que durante unos instantes nada más ocurrió entre los dos. Su comprensión quedó sellada, y el señor Verver casi tenía la impresión de que Charlotte le había puesto ya en su sitio. Pero también tenía la impresión de que Maggie había colocado a Charlotte en su sitio, de lo cual resultaba, como siempre, que ¿dónde estaría él si, a fin de cuentas, no hubiera intervenido Maggie? Ella les había unido, ella les había juntado con el bello sonido que produce un cierre de plata, y allí, con la visión de todo lo anterior llenándole los ojos, el señor Verver se encontraba ante Charlotte, quien le miraba con una expresión que la borrosa visión del señor Verver contribuía a hacer todavía más rara. Sin embargo, sonrió y dijo:

—¡Cuánto hace por mí esta hija mía!

Y en aquella misma situación, es decir, todavía con la visión borrosa, el señor Verver antes vio que oyó la contestación de Charlotte. Sostenía el papel totalmente desdoblado, pero tenía la vista fija en el señor Verver. Charlotte dijo:

—No es de Maggie. Es del Príncipe.

El señor Verver exclamó:

—¡Magnífico! ¡Es lo mejor que podía ocurrir!

—Es lo suficiente.

—Le agradezco que lo juzgue así. Es suficiente para resolver nuestro problema, pero no es suficiente, me parece a mí, para resolver nuestro almuerzo, ¿verdad? *Déjeunons*.

Sin embargo, y a pesar de esta invitación, Charlotte siguió quieta, con el documento a la vista, desplegado. Charlotte preguntó:

—¿No quiere leerlo?

El señor Verver, después de pensar, dijo:

—Si el telegrama la ha dejado convencida, no quiero leerlo. No hace falta.

Como si quisiera cumplir con un deber de conciencia, Charlotte le dio otra oportunidad:

—Puede leerlo si quiere.

El señor Verver volvió a vacilar, pero lo hizo llevado por la amabilidad, no por un impulso curioso:

—¿Es divertido?

Por fin, Charlotte volvió a bajar la vista fijándose en el telegrama y, con un leve movimiento de contracción de los labios, repuso:

—No. Es grave.

—En ese caso no quiero leerlo.

Charlotte Stant dijo:

—Muy grave.

Alegremente, en el momento en que emprendían la marcha, el señor Verver observó:

—¿No le he dicho que el Príncipe es así?

Por toda contestación, la muchacha, antes de cogerle del brazo se guardó el telegrama, arrugado, en un bolsillo de la chaqueta.

Tercera Parte

Capítulo XIV

A mitad del camino ascendente por la «monumental» escalinata Charlotte se detuvo para esperar, al principio sola, que su compañero volviera a reunirse con ella, ya que había descendido hasta el final. Y allí estaba Charlotte con el fin, determinado por la recíproca amabilidad, de que su compañero, tan pronto cumpliera con el deber que le hizo bajar, supiera dónde encontrarla. Si bien Charlotte era extremadamente visible, no se hallaba en condición de exhibirse, pero poco le habría importado que fuera éste el caso, pues a la sazón no cabía decir que ésta fuera la primera ocasión en que se enfrentaba a la sociedad con una conciencia materialmente enriquecida y con la confianza en sí misma espléndidamente reforzada. En el curso de los dos últimos años, Charlotte había sabido, mejor que en cualquier tiempo anterior, lo que significaba tener buen aspecto, es decir, tener tan buen aspecto como sabía, desde mucho tiempo antes, que podía llegar a tener dadas ciertas condiciones. En la velada a que nos referimos, velada de una gran fiesta oficial en el momento culminante de la temporada social londinense de primavera, tenía Charlotte la impresión, en sus nervios, en sus sentidos y en su imaginación, de que esas condiciones estaban profusamente presentes, por lo que quizá nunca había quedado su fe tan justificada como en aquel instante. En la ocasión en la que volvemos a ocuparnos de ella, al alzar la vista por casualidad a un nivel superior al que se encontraba, su mirada se encontró con los severos ojos del coronel Assingham, quien con los codos apoyados en la gran balaustrada de la galería que dominaba la escalinata, intercambió con ella inmediatamente uno de los más sencillos gestos de saludo. La sencillez de la atención del coronel Assingham fue considerada por Charlotte, a pesar de los muchos asuntos en que tenía que pensar, como una de las notas más calladas en aquel gran conjunto de altos sonidos; en realidad, bien cabe decir que Charlotte tuvo la impresión de haber pulsado con el dedo una cuerda o una tecla, creando durante unos segundos una detención de las vibraciones, un sordo sonido. La imagen del coronel Assingham indicaba que Fanny sin duda alguna estaría también presente, aun cuando Charlotte no había tenido la oportunidad de verla. Esto representaba el límite de lo que la imagen del coronel Assingham podía indicar.

Sin embargo, en el aire había más indicios, abundaban en él y muchos contribuían a constituir las condiciones que, para la joven, coronaban brillantemente el momento. En realidad, la propia Charlotte iba también coronada, y todo se conjuntaba, todo se fundía, en la luz, en el color y en el sonido, en los incomparables diamantes que tan felizmente lucía su cabeza, en las restantes joyas, en otras perfecciones de aspecto y disposición que daban a su personal presencia el carácter de un triunfo; todo se conjuntaba y se fundía en la demostrada teoría privada, según la cual lo único que Charlotte necesitaba era material con el que trabajar, y que no había material alguno, por precioso que fuera, que Charlotte no supiera comprender y utilizar, a todo lo cual debemos añadir, por último, el fácil dominio y el intenso goce de su crisis; como la flor de fuerte aroma de la dulzura total. Sí, ya que como crisis estaba la propia Charlotte presta a considerarla, y sin duda era esta presteza lo que contribuía a que hubiera alcanzado, mientras esperaba, la debida seguridad en sí misma, la debida indiferencia, la debida expresión y, sobre todo, como ella misma estimaba, la debida visión de su oportunidad para alcanzar la felicidad, a no ser, claro está, que la oportunidad estuviera en la simple rareza de su magnitud y fuera la causa productora, la causa agente. Los ordenados y festivos invitados, con rumores y esplendores de telas, con vestidos de cola arrastrando, con brillos de estrellas y metálicos sonidos de espadas, y, a pesar de todo esto, muy imperfectamente articulada

su vaga expresión oral; el doble caudal de los que iban y venían, discurriendo por el lugar en el que Charlotte se hallaba de pie, pasaba junto a ella, la rozaba, la obsequiaba con contemplación harto burda y de vez en cuando con una espasmódica frase, una mano ofrecida e, incluso, en algunos casos, con una detención no solicitada; pero Charlotte no se perdía ni un solo rostro aunque tampoco requería protecciones; le gustaba estar, sin la menor duda, en tanto pudiera, tal como estaba, un poco a merced de todos, al hallarse sin compañía pero, aun cuando ello significara cierta audacia, prescindiendo de las raras reflexiones de las aburridas y pulidas caras londinenses; sometida, eso sí, ya que de sumisión se trataba, a observaciones mucho más competentes por ella efectuadas. Charlotte albergaba la esperanza de que nadie se detuviera y se esforzaba en reservarse, pues tenía el propósito de señalar de particular manera la importancia de algo que acababa de ocurrir. Charlotte sabía cómo debía señalarlo, y lo que ahora estaba haciendo allí constituía ya el principio.

En consecuencia, cuando Charlotte vio desde el lugar en que se encontraba que el Príncipe regresaba, tuvo la impresión de que el lugar en su totalidad adquiría mayor altura y mayor anchura, y que quedaba más dispuesto para la celebración de grandes ocasiones, con su brillante cúpula más elevada, con sus ascensos y descensos más majestuosos, con sus altos mármoles más vivamente pulidos, con los numerosos personajes de la realeza, extranjera y nacional, más insólita, con su simbolismo de hospitalidad «estatal» no sólo realzado sino también más refinado. Ésta fue, sin duda, la gran consecuencia de una causa bastante sabida, y representó una considerable agitación interna nacida de la simple visión, aunque parezca sorprendente, de Americo entre la multitud; pero Charlotte tenía sus razones, y allí las mantenía; en realidad, llevaba sus razones tan responsable y abiertamente como su alta tiara, su cerrado abanico, su indiferente eminencia sin compañía; ese fue el momento en que Americo llegó junto a ella y Charlotte pudo cogerle del brazo, mostrarse situada en su nivel, que sintió supremamente justificado. Desde luego, Charlotte permitía que se vislumbrara levemente su actitud, pero pocas eran, y sólo las más evidentes, las razones que dejaban adivinar esta discriminación, favorable aun cuando se mostrara dispuesta a aceptar que recibía inspiración y apoyo en cantidad suficiente para casi cualquier cosa, del valor individual del yerno de su marido, procedente de su elegante e inconsciente manera en la multitudinaria suma social, de destacar sobre todos, de hacer caso omiso de todo, y de detenerse más que todos junto a ella. Parecía que con la separación, incluso la de más corta duración, Charlotte casi se olvidara, o no pudiera creer, lo mucho que la visión de Americo la afectaba, por lo que la reaparición de éste tenía virtud propia, una especie de desproporcionada intensidad que parecía indicar una relación de Americo con ocultas fuerzas de renovación. ¿Qué hacía Americo, cuando estaba lejos de ella, para que al regresar siempre pareciera, como Charlotte decía, «más él»? Por encima de todo género de *cabotinage*, Americo casi parecía un actor que, en los momentos que median entre un mutis y una nueva entrada en escena, vuelve a su camerino y retoca ante el espejo su maquillaje, impulsado por su necesidad de producir los debidos efectos. Por ejemplo, el Príncipe era, por el momento, la persona con quien Charlotte más le gustaba estar y eso que sólo hacía diez minutos que se había separado de ella. Esta verdad revistió todavía mayor vigor para Charlotte cuando el Príncipe le manifestó sus reparos a volver de manera tan visible juntos a las estancias de la planta superior. Y aquel pobre hombre maravilloso no podía evitar que el trayecto de los dos fuera mucho más visible de lo que cualquiera de ellos pudiera desear; cuando Charlotte volvió a alzar la vista a la figura de Bob Assingham, todavía allí arriba en su galería, y todavía con la vista fija en ella, Charlotte tuvo conciencia de que a pesar de las interiores y constantes voces de aviso, le producía placer el testimonio que de su esplendor le daba la solitaria vigilancia del coronel Assingham.

En las grandes fiestas siempre estaba solo nuestro querido coronel; no eran éstas las ocasiones en las que recogía los frutos de la semilla sembrada en su casa, pero nadie había que fuera capaz de conceder a esta soledad menos importancia, ni de afrontarla con más indiferencia, y hasta tal punto era así que el comportamiento del coronel parecía más el de una persona harto presentable, encargada de la vigilancia policial del lugar o del buen funcionamiento de las luces eléctricas, que el de un invitado. Como veremos, para la señora Verver el coronel representaba, con la perfecta buena fe de su evidente inexpresividad, algo harto definido, pero la valentía de Charlotte no era tan insensata como para inducirle a notificar al coronel que el único truco de magia que el Príncipe había utilizado, había consistido, y de ello hacía pocos minutos, en acompañar a Maggie, que se había retirado de la escena, a su carruaje. De todas maneras, Charlotte, conocedora de la probable presencia de Fanny, quedó dividida durante un tiempo, por una parte, entre la sensación de que era un hecho que debía tenerse en cuenta y darle el debido tratamiento, lo cual la inducía en cierto grado a la prudencia, a la pusilanimidad de evitar el encuentro; por otra parte, una sensación

harto diferente: una impaciencia que acabó por prevalecer, unas ansias de que se llegara a sospechar de ella, de ser sondeada, de ser verdaderamente acusada, para pasar de una vez el mal momento y poder demostrarse a sí misma, por no hablar ya de la señora Assingham, que podía quedar plenamente justificada; dicho en pocas palabras, que podía enfrentarse abiertamente con su problema. En realidad, para Charlotte no se trataba de un problema, pero sentía en los huesos que Fanny lo trataría como tal, y ella estaba obligada, a causa de la más elemental decencia, a aceptar cuanto procediera de aquella amiga. Charlotte podía dar a los hechos, al manifestarlos, un tratamiento en el que concurrieran todo género de tiernas precauciones, de consideraciones agradecidas, de seguridades; aquellos hechos la obligaban, como también todo lo que la señora Assingham había hecho en beneficio suyo, a no desentenderse de ellos sin antes haberlos despojado de cuanto los envolvía y haberlos puesto de manifiesto.

Pero concurría la circunstancia de que esta noche, y Charlotte se daba cuenta claramente a medida que los minutos transcurrían, ejercía influencia en cuanto la rodeaba; exactamente no podría comportarse, y Charlotte sabía por qué, con la firmeza con que podía albergar esperanzas de comportarse en cualquier otro momento respecto al correcto tono y talante con el que debía desarrollar aquel proceso. Poco después, Charlotte dijo al Príncipe:

—Quédate conmigo; no permitas que nadie te aleje de mí sí, quiero que Fanny Assingham nos vea juntos y cuanto antes mejor.

Dijo estas palabras manteniendo la mano sobre el brazo de Americo, conservando de esta manera su atención para sí, entre los constantes motivos de dispersión, e induciendo al Príncipe a confesar que, por el momento, sólo la comprendía vagamente. Charlotte tuvo que explicarle que quería ver a Fanny Assingham, quien evidentemente tenía que estar allí, pues el coronel jamás se movía de su casa sin la compañía de su esposa; por otra parte, tan pronto llegaban los dos a casa ajena, el coronel jamás se ocupaba del sino de su esposa. Americo repuso, después de la explicación:

—¿Que nos vea juntos? ¿Y a santo de qué? ¿Es que no nos ha visto juntos muy a menudo?

Estas palabras obligaron a Charlotte a decir a Americo que aquello que había ocurrido en otro tiempo y de otra guisa, actualmente carecía de importancia, pero, de todas maneras, en esta ocasión sabía muy bien de qué se trataba. En tono de negligente consentimiento, el Príncipe observó:

—Eres rara, cara mia.

Pero fuera cual fuese la clase de rareza de Charlotte, el Príncipe procuraba evitar que, mientras caminaban, fuera abordada por alguien, incluso le advirtió de nuevo, como muy a menudo le había advertido, de lo mucho que ayudaba en semejantes situaciones la intrínseca rareza de las reuniones multitudinarias londinenses, reuniones que eran como un vago, lento y sin sentido ir y venir del oleaje, reuniones que giraban sobre sí mismas como si temieran la amenaza de una conversación suspendida sobre ellas y cuya caída, con los consecuentes y refrescantes remojones y salpicaduras, jamás se producía. Desde luego, Charlotte era rara. Mientras los dos caminaban, la propia Charlotte lo reconoció. ¿Cómo no iba a ser rara, cuando la situación en que se encontraba presa, y en que Americo también se encontraba preso, llevaba la impronta de su rareza? Ella ya había aceptado, como hemos dicho, su sensación de que, temblando en el aire, se avecinaba una crisis que los afectaría a todos; cuando estos momentos no eran deprimentes, lo cual constituía la forma que principalmente habían adoptado para Charlotte, tenían la virtud de ser altamente estimulantes.

Más tarde, en un rincón al que la señora Assingham había llevado a Charlotte con cierta premura, al ver un sofá vacío, después de una sola y atenta detención, esta sensación de crisis quedó agudizada más que amortiguada. Fanny había escuchado las palabras de Charlotte: sí, estaba allí en compañía de Americo, pues Maggie, que había llegado con ellos, a los diez minutos cambió de parecer y se fue arrepentida de haber acudido.

Fanny Assingham preguntó:

—¿De modo que se ha quedado usted a solas con el Príncipe?

La contestación de Charlotte a estas palabras determinó que las dos mujeres, de acuerdo con los deseos de ésta, experimentaran la necesidad de cierto aislamiento, y que Fanny Assingham tomara posesión del sofá ya aludido. Estaban las dos juntas, solas, y —¡con cuánta claridad!— sola se había ido Maggie, pues su padre, como de costumbre, no había podido venir. «¿Como de costumbre?», pareció preguntarse la señora Assingham, quien manifestó que las renuencias del señor Verver no le habían llamado la atención hasta el presente. A estas palabras, Charlotte repuso que la resistencia de su esposo a efectuar salidas de carácter social había aumentado notablemente en los últimos tiempos; pero esta noche, reconoció Charlotte, había

alegado que no se encontraba bien. Maggie mostró deseos de quedarse en casa en compañía de su padre. Sí, aquella noche el Príncipe y Maggie, después de cenar fuera de casa, habían regresado a Portland Place, y de allí habían partido para asistir a la fiesta en compañía de Charlotte. También era cierto que Maggie había acudido sólo para complacer a su padre, tras suplicar al Príncipe y a Charlotte que fueran sin ella, pero luego Maggie cedió, por el momento, ante las argumentaciones esgrimidas por su padre. Pero aquí, cuando después de la larga espera en el interior del carruaje por fin consiguieron entrar, aquí, decíamos, tan pronto ascendieron por la escalinata y se hallaron en las estancias, los remordimientos dominaron a Maggie, y se negó a prestar atención a ningún género de razonamientos, por lo que, a estas horas, como dijo Charlotte, los dos seguramente estarían celebrando una fiesta íntima en su casa. Pero Charlotte también dijo que esto le parecía perfecto, por cuanto nada había en el mundo que les gustara más a los dos que esos paréntesis de felicidad, esas pequeñas celebraciones, esas largas conversaciones con las frases «mañana vendré a verte» y «no, no, seré yo quien vaya a verte a ti», fingidas reanudaciones de su vida anterior. En ciertos momentos, aquellos dos seres tan queridos parecían niños jugando al juego de las visitas, jugando al «Señor Thompson» y la «Señora Fane», cada uno de ellos albergando la esperanza de que el otro se quedaría a tomar el té. Charlotte estaba segura de que encontraría a Maggie en casa cuando regresara, palabras que fueron la contestación que la señora Verver dio, a modo de remate, a la pregunta con la que culminó el interrogatorio de haber dicho lo suficiente para dar mucho que pensar a la señora Assingham, cosa que le gustaba mucho más incluso de lo que anteriormente había imaginado. Charlotte, por su parte, tenía también mucho que pensar, pero ahora algo en la expresión de Fanny la inducía a creer que ella, Charlotte, tenía todavía más cosas en que pensar de lo que antes había imaginado.

—¿Ha dicho que su marido está enfermo? ¿Tan enfermo que juzgó que no podía acudir?

—No, querida, no creo que sea así. Si hubiera estado tan enfermo, yo no habría venido.

La señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿Y Maggie estaba preocupada?

—Se preocupa fácilmente, ya sabe. Maggie temía que se tratara de una gripe, enfermedad que, en diferentes ocasiones, aunque jamás con gravedad alguna, ha afectado a su padre.

—Pero ¿usted no teme que sea la gripe?

Charlotte quedó pensativa. Constantemente había considerado que consultar su caso con la persona con quien más a menudo había consultado sus dificultades más íntimas, antes representaría para ella una ayuda que un entorpecimiento más; en este sentido, la consulta venía a representar la única posibilidad que se le ofrecía, sin ocultar nada, incluso previendo un par de futuros problemas, tentadoramente abierta ante ella. Además, ¿acaso no era cierto que Fanny, en el fondo, casi esperaba y casi necesitaba que ocurrieran cosas? Y esto era así hasta el punto que Fanny quedaría defraudada si Charlotte, además de lo que a la propia Fanny se le hubiera ocurrido ya, no ponía algo entre los dientes de su constante rumiar inquieto, de aquel cultivo del temor del cual nuestra joven ya había tenido atisbos, de que quizá ya hubiera ido «demasiado lejos» en el cultivo de su irreprimible interés en las vidas ajenas. Pero Charlotte, juntando una cosa con otra, poco a poco se había dado cuenta de lo que en realidad había ocurrido recientemente, o sea, que los consortes Assingham vagando de un lado para otro, igual que todos los invitados, se habían encontrado en la galería por pura casualidad, lo cual ocurrió después de que el coronel, desde su balaustrada, observara, bajo la propicia e intensa iluminación, la pública reunión de Charlotte con el Príncipe. La misma sequedad de este encuentro entre los dos consortes había tenido la virtud, como siempre ocurría, de hacer saltar la chispa de la curiosidad de la esposa, y el marido, conocedor como era de todo lo que en las cosas veía su mujer, le había arrojado, a modo de buen hueso que roer, cierta información acerca de la manera en que una de las jóvenes amigas de la señora Assingham trataba a uno de sus jóvenes amigos. El coronel sabía perfectamente —ésta era, por lo menos, la liberal presunción de Charlotte— que ella no «iba» con nadie, pero Charlotte también sabía que, habida cuenta de las circunstancias, sería inevitablemente sacrificada, de una forma u otra, en aras del mayor interés de las enjundiosas conversaciones de la inimitable pareja. Entretanto, el Príncipe también había sacrificado a Charlotte, bajo presiones, pues el Embajador se había acercado a él, portador de un mensaje de una persona allegada a la realeza, en presencia de la cual el Príncipe fue conducido; después de este hecho, Charlotte habló durante cinco minutos con Sir John Brinder, que formaba parte del grupo del Embajador y que, un tanto astutamente, se había quedado con ella. Entonces llegó Fanny, que al verlos se dirigió hacia ellos, al mismo tiempo que lo hacía otra persona a la que Charlotte no conocía, pero sí la señora Assingham y Sir John. Charlotte dejó en las competentes manos de su amiga la tarea de conseguir que los otros dos trabaran conversación inmediatamente, y de hallar la

manera de hablar con ella en relativo aislamiento. Ésta era la breve historia del desarrollo de la sensación en su fuero interno, que ahora contribuía más y más rápidamente a que advirtiera que se le ofrecía una oportunidad de inapreciable valor, una oportunidad que quizá jamás volvería a ser tan propia para exponer tan vívidamente una idea. La idea de Charlotte estaba allí, ante ella: era aguda, brillante y verdadera, y, sobre todo, suya. Había llegado a ella por sí sola, nadie la había ayudado, ni siquiera Americo. Él menos que nadie, ya que con toda seguridad nada hubiera querido tener que ver con semejante idea. Expresarla ahora con la debida fuerza ante Fanny Assingham tendría la virtud de impulsar a Charlotte hacia la luz que había visto nacer con más eficacia que cualquier otro resorte que pudiera pulsar, en mucho tiempo. La dirección hacia la que Charlotte quería avanzar era la de su mayor libertad, libertad que era para ella lo más importante en el mundo. En consecuencia, la oportunidad de Charlotte pocos minutos después de que en el rostro de la señora Assingham se formara una expresión de casi imprudente interés había adquirido para Charlotte tan alto valor que bien podemos comparar a Fanny, entre nosotros, y mientras la intensidad no menguó, con la persona que sostiene en la mano un pequeño espejo, extendido el brazo al frente, y mira el reflejo de la cabeza un poco vuelta a un lado. Dicho en pocas palabras, jugando inteligentemente con el valor de esta oportunidad, Charlotte contestó a la última pregunta de Fanny con las siguientes palabras:

—¿No recuerda lo que hace poco me dijo en ocasión de no sé qué? ¿Recuerda que me dijo que no temo a nada? En consecuencia, querida, ¡no me haga semejante pregunta!

La señora Assingham replicó:

—¿Puedo preguntarle en qué situación se encuentra actualmente con respecto a su pobre marido?

—Ciertamente, querida. Sin embargo, teniendo en consideración que me formula esta pregunta como si quizá yo no supiera qué pensar al efecto, creo que lo mejor que puedo hacer es lo preciso para que se dé cuenta de que sé perfectamente qué pensar.

La señora Assingham vaciló. Luego, parpadeando un poco, corrió el riesgo:

—¿Y no cree que, dándose el caso de que alguien tuviera que regresar al lado de su marido para ayudarle en un mal momento, la persona más indicada sería usted?

Bien, pues, podemos decir que la contestación de Charlotte a semejante pregunta quedó visiblemente conformada por el servicio a los más altos valores. Los más altos valores fueron el buen humor, la sinceridad, la claridad y, evidentemente, la pura verdad:

—Si pudiéramos ser perfectamente francas y amables la una para con la otra, creo que sería mejor para todos, ¿no cree? Y en el caso de que no podamos serlo, más valdrá que no hablemos, lo cual sería terrible, pues en realidad todavía no hemos comenzado a hablar. Puede usted preguntármelo todo, cualquier cosa y, quiero que lo sepa, no conseguirá alterarme.

Fanny Assingham rió y repuso:

—Mi querida Charlotte, tenga la absoluta seguridad de que no pretendo alterarla.

—Bueno, yo sólo quería decir, mi muy querida señora, que, aun cuando usted estimara imprescindible alterarme, no podría conseguirlo. Nadie puede alterarme, ya que es característica propia de mi situación, la cual no se debe a mis propios méritos, el que yo haya quedado fija, fija, exactamente fija, igual que un alfiler clavado hasta la cabeza en un acerico. Estoy situada, y no puedo imaginar a persona alguna más situada que yo. Estoy así.

Ciertamente, Fanny jamás había escuchado palabras en las que se pusiera tanto énfasis, y este énfasis produjo en la mirada de Fanny, a pesar de que tenía buenas razones para esforzarse en evitar que la traicionara, una especie de ansiedad de comprensión. Dijo:

—Me atrevería a decir que la definición de la situación en que se encuentra, sea cual sea a juicio de usted, no constituye una respuesta a mi pregunta.

Tras de una pausa, añadió:

—Y confieso que, a mi parecer, sus palabras me dan mayor motivo para insistir en mi pregunta. Habla usted de ser «franca». Pues bien, ¿cómo puede usted dejar de serlo? Si Maggie se ha ido de aquí, debido a que estaba tan preocupada que no se sentía capaz de quedarse, dejando que su marido y usted se mostraran juntos aquí, sin ella, ¿acaso las razones de su preocupación no merecen mayor atención?

Charlotte replicó:

—Si no la merecen se debe a que, en cierta manera, salta a la vista. Para mí no son tales razones, y no lo eran cuando me doblegué a los deseos de Adam de que viniera aquí sin él. Y me doblegué a sus deseos de la misma manera que me doblego a todos sus deseos, siguiendo con ello una norma inquebrantable. Pero esto no altera, desde luego, el hecho de que fuera la hija de mi marido, y no yo, su esposa, quien estimara que, a

fin de cuentas, podía ser ella quien se quedara con él, ella quien hiciera el sacrificio, sin olvidar, desde luego, que tiene un marido en quien pensar.

Dichas estas palabras, añadió lo que bien se puede considerar su fundamento:

—Sencillamente, debo enfrentarme con la verdad; la verdad radica en que Maggie, en líneas generales, piensa más en su padre que en su marido. Y mi situación es tal, ¿comprende usted?, que lo que acabo de decir es algo que debo tener en cuenta con carácter muy primordial.

La señora Assingham, exhalando un suspiro, jadeando un poco, aunque procurando ocultarlo, giró el cuerpo hacia un lado, en el sofá, como movida por un resorte situado en su interior:

—Si con estas palabras pretende usted insinuar que Maggie no adora al Príncipe…

—No digo que no le adora, sino que no piensa en él. Una cosa no comporta la otra, en todo caso. Ella le adora de la manera que he dicho. Y, a fin de cuentas, ¿qué razón puede haber para que el Príncipe y yo no nos «mostremos juntos», como usted ha dicho?

Sonriendo, Charlotte dio el siguiente remate a sus palabras:

—Ya nos habíamos mostrado juntos en otro tiempo.

La señora Assingham se limitó durante unos breves instantes a mirarla con fijeza. Luego, dijo con brusquedad:

—Debiera usted sentirse absolutamente feliz. Vive entre gente muy buena.

El efecto de estas palabras fue dejar parada a Charlotte. Sin embargo, en el mismo instante, su rostro se tornó bello, duro y levemente radiante. Charlotte dijo:

—¿Acaso se expresa con palabras un sentimiento tan fatuamente temerario? Esto es algo que debe ser manifestado prudentemente con respecto a una, por una persona tan bondadosa que acepte la responsabilidad de decirlo, y de manera que le dé a una la oportunidad de demostrar sus buenos modales, por el medio de no contradecir semejante afirmación. Puede tener usted la seguridad de que jamás sufrirá la desgracia, o lo que sea, de oír mis quejas.

—Ciertamente, querida, eso espero de todo corazón.

Y el espíritu de la mayor de las dos mujeres halló alivio en una carcajada más sonora de lo que sus deseos de reserva aconsejaban.

No prestó Charlotte atención alguna a la demostración de su amiga. Prosiguió:

—Debido a nuestra ausencia después de contraer matrimonio, y a haber estado alejados de ella principalmente durante los largos meses de nuestra estancia en América, Maggie todavía tiene atrasos, todavía tiene pérdidas que compensar, todavía necesita demostrar lo mucho que echó en falta a su padre durante su larga ausencia. Echó de menos su compañía; para Maggie, pase lo que pase, es absolutamente necesario gozar en gran medida de ella. En consecuencia, Maggie va acumulando, siempre que puede, períodos de compañía de su padre, un poco aquí, un poco allá, hasta llegar a gozar de ella en esa gran medida que antes he dicho. El hecho de que no vivamos bajo el mismo techo, hecho que, me apresuro a aclarar, sólo ofrece ventajas, es causa y razón de que Maggie vea a su padre más a menudo que cuando vivían juntos en una misma casa. Para tener la seguridad de ver a su padre, está siempre concertando citas con él y organizando encuentros, lo cual no tenía que hacer cuando vivían juntos.

Después de una pausa, prosiguió implacablemente:

—Pero a Maggie le gusta organizar, le gusta de manera muy especial, y la consecuencia de que tengamos hogares separados es, en realidad, el mayor contacto e intimidad entre ella y su padre. Por ejemplo, lo que ha ocurrido hoy ha sido prácticamente el resultado de una maquinación. Maggie prefiere tratar a su padre a solas. Y mi marido también prefiere tratar a solas a su hija. A eso me refería cuando dije anteriormente que estoy situada, fija. Y lo más importante en la vida es, como dicen ellos, que cada cual sepa el lugar que le corresponde.

Charlotte coronó su argumentación diciendo:

—¿Y no le parece a usted que esto también sitúa y fija al Príncipe?

En ese momento Fanny Assingham tuvo la impresión de que le hubieran puesto delante un gran plato colmado de alimentos y la hubieran invitado a que su inteligencia se cebara en la ofrenda, pues muchas y muy fuertes fueron las palabras intencionadas en el notable parlamento de Charlotte. Pero Fanny Assingham también comprendió que abalanzarse libremente sobre el plato, gozar con libertad de él —además de que carecía del tiempo preciso para ello— podía producir el efecto de alejar la mano que se lo servía, alterar el orden y disposición de las cosas, y, dicho vulgarmente, armar un cisco. En consecuencia, después de pensarlo debidamente, Fanny cogió solamente una ciruela:

—¿Tan situada y fija queda usted que se ve obligada a tomar medidas?

—Debo tomarlas, ciertamente.

—¿Y el Príncipe también, si es que piensa como usted?

—Ni más ni menos, a mi parecer.

La señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿Y el Príncipe también toma medidas para cobrarse sus atrasos?

Esta pregunta había brotado espontáneamente de sus labios, fue como otra porción de comida de aquel gran plato, que la tentó irresistiblemente. En el mismo instante de pronunciar estas palabras tuvo la impresión de haber manifestado su pensamiento más claramente de lo que había querido, pero enseguida comprendió que debía seguir el camino iniciado con la mayor sencillez cualquiera que fuese el riesgo, y la mayor sencillez consistía en hablar con tranquila audacia:

—¿Cobrarse sus atrasos, quería decir, por el medio de visitarla a usted?

Sin embargo, Charlotte replicó, tal como su amiga diría, sin pestañear siquiera. Negó con un movimiento de cabeza, aunque con bella serenidad, y dijo tranquilamente:

—Nunca viene.

Fanny Assingham exclamó:

—¡Oh!

Con lo cual se sintió un poco estúpida. Charlotte dijo:

—Así es. A pesar de que podría hacerlo, de todos modos.

Fanny, todavía sumida en vaguedad, preguntó:

—¿«De todos modos»?

Pero en esta ocasión Charlotte no oyó la pregunta porque su mirada, vagando a lo lejos, había quedado fija. El Príncipe volvía a estar presente. El Embajador seguía al lado del Príncipe, y a ellos se unió un personaje vestido de uniforme, viejo hombrecillo, evidentemente del más alto rango militar, tachonado de cruces y medallas. Esto dio a Charlotte tiempo para proseguir:

—Hace tres meses que no viene. —A continuación, como si tuviera aún en el oído la última palabra de su amiga, dijo:

—Sí, «de todos modos» podría venir. Pero el Príncipe ha decidido hacer lo contrario. En la situación en que me encuentro también yo podría visitarle. Es absurdo que él y yo no podamos reunirnos.

Fanny Assingham observó:

—Se han reunido… esta noche.

—Efectivamente; por el momento, así es. Pero lo que quería decir es que, habida cuenta de la situación en que tanto él como yo nos encontramos, yo puedo visitarle.

Con casi escandalizada solemnidad, Fanny Assingham preguntó:

—¿Y lo hace?

El notar que la señora Assingham «se pasaba» en el tono de sus palabras indujo a Charlotte a querer darle una cierta gravedad a la situación, a infundirle ironía, a observar durante unos instantes un toque de alto el fuego. Después dijo:

—Lo he hecho. Pero esto carece de importancia, y he hablado de ello sólo para mostrarle los efectos que nuestra situación produce. Esencialmente, el Príncipe y yo nos hallamos en la misma situación. Ahora bien, su situación es asunto suyo; yo sólo quiero hablar de la mía.

La señora Assingham declaró:

—Su situación es perfecta, querida.

—No digo que no lo sea. En realidad, globalmente considerada, creo que lo es. Y, tal como le he dicho, no me quejo. Sin embargo, debo representar el papel que esta situación exige de mí.

Con un irreprimible estremecimiento, la señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿«Representar»?

—¿Acaso no es una representación aceptar la situación? Yo la acepto. ¿Qué menos puedo hacer?

—Quiero que se convenza, por lo menos, de que es usted una persona muy afortunada.

—¿A eso lo llama «por lo menos»? Desde el punto de vista de mi libertad, yo lo llamo «por lo más». En fin, poco importa la manera en que califiquemos mi situación.

Pero la impaciencia de la señora Assingham prevaleció sobre la disciplina de su mente:

—De todas maneras, no permite que su situación la induzca a pensar excesivamente en su libertad.

—Ignoro lo que significa para usted «excesivamente». Pienso en la libertad tal como yo la entiendo, ¿o

acaso puedo pensar en ella de otra manera? Usted misma pensaría en su libertad si el coronel le diera la clase de libertad de que yo gozo. Y no tengo por qué decirle, ya que sus conocimientos en todas las materias son superiores a los míos, qué es lo que más importancia tiene en la libertad.

Después de una pausa, Charlotte prosiguió:

—Usted, en lo tocante a la libertad, sólo conoce personalmente el estado de no necesitarla ni echarla en falta. Su marido jamás la trata como a una mujer que para él tenga menos importancia que otra.

Jadeando ahora sin disimulos, Fanny dijo:

—¡No hable de otras mujeres! ¿Considera que el perfectamente natural interés del señor Verver por su hija…?

Charlotte terminó con gran presteza la frase iniciada por su amiga:

—¿… constituye el más grande afecto que es capaz de sentir? Pues sí, señora, sin la menor duda. Y así es, a pesar de que he hecho todo lo que he podido para inspirarle un mayor afecto. Lo he hecho todo, con ansia, con entusiasmo, y ésta ha sido mi tarea mes tras mes. Pero no lo he conseguido, y esta noche he tenido ocasión, una vez más, de darme cuenta de ello con toda claridad. He albergado vanas esperanzas, ya que, tal como le dije, en su momento fui advertida debidamente.

Y, como sea que Charlotte no vio en el rostro de su amiga rastros de guardar semejante recuerdo, le dijo:

—Mi marido me dijo que quería casarse conmigo porque yo podía ser útil a su hija.

Después de lo cual, esbozó una maravillosa sonrisa y concluyó:

—Y ya ve, lo soy.

Durante unos instantes poco faltó para que Fanny Assingham dijera que esto, precisamente, era lo que ella no alcanzaba a ver. Y a punto estuvo de añadir: «A mi juicio, no ha hecho usted absolutamente nada por que los proyectos del señor Verver se convirtieran en realidad, ya que ahora, según lo que usted dice, Maggie no piensa menos en él, sino que piensa más. ¿Cómo es posible, pues, que con tan gran remedio todavía quede en tan considerable medida el mal que se pretendía remediar?». Pero se calló a tiempo, porque tenía conciencia, sobre todo, de la existencia de realidades todavía más profundas que las que ella había osado temer, que allí había «más cosas» que las insinuadas en cuanto Charlotte había confesado —y debemos tener en cuenta que Fanny Assingham era una entendida en confesiones—, por lo que Fanny, al tener la impresión de no saber en qué punto debía poner freno a su tolerancia, y al tener la impresión de no saber en qué punto debía dejar de dar su activa aprobación y, sobre todo, al no saber en qué punto dar consejos sería un acto precipitado, decidió adoptar las sencillas apariencias de no medir ni pesar la actitud de su joven amiga. El único problema radicaba en que Fanny se dio cuenta inmediatamente de que se excedía en la adopción de dichas apariencias. Esto la había llevado a reaccionar con excesiva brusquedad y a prescindir de todo, diciendo:

—Con toda franqueza, ¡no entiendo nada de cuanto me ha dicho!

Charlotte reaccionó inmediatamente y se le sonrojó perceptiblemente la cara. Durante unos instantes tuvo la misma expresión que su amiga había adquirido, y pareció que en su interior se alzaran veinte protestas que cerraban el camino de comunicación con su amiga. Pero Charlotte tenía que hacer una selección, y su selección era siempre la más acertada posible. Ahora eligió certeramente, debido sobre todo a que su respuesta no fue de enojo, sino de tristeza:

—¿Me abandona usted?

—¿Abandonarla yo?

—¿Me abandona precisamente en el momento en que, a mi parecer, más merezco la lealtad de una amiga? Si lo hace, será usted injusta conmigo. Más aún, será cruel. No me parece digno de usted el que finja desear enojarse conmigo para, de esa manera, disimular su abandono.

Charlotte hablaba con la más noble moderación de tono, y la imagen de alta, pálida y luminosa desilusión que ahora ofrecía, como la de un ser paciente y desolado en su esplendor, producía una impresión tan firmemente impuesta que la propia Charlotte podía medirla en toda su intensidad, y gozar de ella hasta la última gota, como suele decirse, con una perfección carente del más leve matiz vulgar de triunfo. Charlotte terminó su demostración, aunque sólo lo hizo en aras de la verdad:

—¿Y qué significa enojarse conmigo sino negarme el derecho a reconocer las condiciones anejas al trato que cerré?

En el momento en que apartaba la vista de Fanny Assingham y volvía la cabeza hacia un lado, concluyó:

—Da igual, porque puedo cumplirlas sola.

Charlotte había vuelto la cabeza para dar la bienvenida al Príncipe y al Embajador que, habiendo

terminado su conversación con el Mariscal de Campo, estaban ahora allí y le habían dirigido ya una frase, de lo cual se dio cuenta; pero la frase en cuestión no consiguió atravesar la dorada aureola en la que el pensamiento de la joven estaba inmerso en aquellos momentos. Charlotte había demostrado lo que se había propuesto demostrar, lo había demostrado concienzudamente y de una vez para siempre, por lo que no tenía necesidad alguna de insistir; su triunfo quedaba reflejado en el rostro de los dos distinguidos caballeros que se encontraban ante ella, con su expresión de inconfundible admiración ante el aspecto excepcionalmente radiante de nuestra joven amiga. Al principio, Charlotte se limitó a contemplar ese reflejo sin fijarse en la forma mucho menos adecuada que este mismo reflejo podía adoptar en la cara de la pobre Fanny, la pobre Fanny que se había quedado en la situación de mirar el «tanteo» conseguido por Charlotte en aquel juego, «tanteo» que ésta había escrito en la pared con sólo unos cuantos trazos rápidos. Después Charlotte escuchó lo que el Embajador le decía, en francés, lo cual era, sin duda, repetición de lo que antes le había dicho:

—*En très-haut lieu* se ha expresado el deseo de su presencia, Madame; yo he asumido la responsabilidad, por no hablar ya del honor, en mi calidad de su más respetuoso amigo, de hacer lo preciso para abreviar tan augusta impaciencia.

Dicho en otras palabras: el más alto personaje que quepa imaginar, de acuerdo con la extraña fórmula empleada en las sociedades sujetas a los más altos personajes que quepa imaginar, había ordenado que «fueran a buscar» a Charlotte, quien con gran sorpresa exclamó:

—¿Y qué quiere de mí?

Mientras Charlotte decía estas palabras, cobraba conciencia de que el pasmo de Fanny había tenido ahora la ocasión de subir de punto en gran manera y, acto seguido, a los oídos de Charlotte llegaron las palabras del Príncipe, autoritarias e incluso dotadas de cierta perentoria sequedad:

—Debes ir inmediatamente. Te han convocado.

El Embajador, sirviéndose también de la autoridad, se las arregló para coger la mano de Charlotte, que pasó su brazo; en el momento de ponerse en marcha en compañía del Embajador, Charlotte se dio cuenta de que Americo se había vuelto hacia Fanny Assingham, aun cuando solamente para excusarla a ella. Las explicaciones que tuviera que dar a Charlotte se las daría Americo después, aun cuando seguramente ella habría ya comprendido por sí misma la situación. Sin embargo, ante Fanny, él se limitó a reír, con el evidente fin de expresar de esta manera a su infalible amiga que, en su caso, las explicaciones sobraban.

Capítulo XV

Sin embargo, debemos hacer constar que, en el mismo instante, el Príncipe tuvo ocasión de comprobar cuán poco fundada era su presunción, porque al hallarse a solas con él, la señora Assingham, incorruptible, le preguntó:

—¿Han mandado a buscar a Charlotte por medio de usted?

—No, mi querida amiga, ha sido por mediación del Embajador, como ha podido usted ver.

—Sí, pero al Embajador y a usted, durante el último cuarto de hora, se los puede considerar como una sola persona. Además, se trata del Embajador de su país.

Aquí también debemos advertir que cuanto más examinaba Fanny aquel asunto, más negro lo veía. Ahora dijo:

—Han relacionado a Charlotte con usted. La han tratado como si fuera un apéndice suyo.

Divertido, el Príncipe exclamó:

—¡Mi «apéndice»! ¡Oh, *cara mia*, qué manera de denominar a Charlotte! En realidad, se la ha tratado como mi ornamento y mi gloria[1]. Charlotte, como suegra, constituye un caso tan notable que difícilmente puede usted, *cara mia*, encontrar motivos de reproche en lo sucedido.

—Pues a mi parecer, bastantes ornamentos tiene usted y bastantes glorias, sin necesidad de Charlotte.

Después de decir estas palabras, la señora Assingham observó:

—Y no es, ciertamente, su suegra. En estas materias un leve matiz representa una diferencia enorme. No está en modo alguno emparentada con usted, y si Charlotte llega a ser conocida en las más altas esferas, debido a que va con usted…, entonces… entonces…

Tan intensa era la emoción que sentía que se le cortó el habla. El Príncipe con su buen humor preguntó:

—Entonces, ¿qué?

—Pues ¡que más valdría que no la conocieran!

Con acento todavía divertido, el joven Príncipe observó:

—Le aseguro que ni siquiera he mencionado su nombre. ¿Imagina usted que les he preguntado si querían conocerla? No creo preciso demostrarle que Charlotte habla con su sola presencia, sobre todo en ocasiones como la presente y con el aspecto que esta noche tiene. ¿Cómo es posible que pase inadvertida? ¿Cómo es posible que no tenga «éxito»?

Mientras Fanny Assingham observaba el rostro del Príncipe dejándole decir lo que quisiera, como si intentara ver cómo lo diría, añadió:

—Además, jamás debemos olvidar un hecho: Charlotte y yo tenemos los mismos vínculos. Es decir, habida cuenta de nuestros respectivos *sposi*, socialmente hablando no cabe decir que Charlotte y yo sólo seamos conocidos. Los dos viajamos en el mismo buque.

Dichas estas palabras, sonrió con un candor que matizó su énfasis. Fanny Assingham se sintió dominada por el talante especial del Príncipe, lo que la obligó a refugiarse por unos instantes en un rincón de su conciencia, en el que podía decirse a sí misma que se alegraba de no estar enamorada de semejante hombre. Al igual que le había ocurrido con Charlotte momentos antes, Fanny Assingham se sentía cohibida por la diferencia que mediaba entre lo que tenía que escuchar y lo que ella podía decir, entre lo que realmente sentía y lo que podía mencionar. Entonces dijo:

—Únicamente diré que me parece de gran importancia, ahora que están ustedes arraigados aquí, que Charlotte sea conocida en las presentaciones y en las recepciones sucesivas, de una manera concreta, como la esposa de su marido, y de ninguna manera ni, en el menor grado siquiera, por cualquier otra circunstancia. Por otra parte, ignoro lo que usted ha querido decir con lo del «mismo buque». Charlotte desde luego, se encuentra a bordo del buque del señor Verver.

—¿Y acaso no estoy yo también en el buque del señor Verver? Si no hubiera sido por el buque del señor Verver, ahora yo me encontraría…

El Príncipe interrumpió la frase para efectuar un rápido ademán con el que el dedo índice, en expresivo movimiento y expresiva dirección; señaló las más hondas profundidades, tras lo cual continuó diciendo:

—Hundido, hundido, hundido.

Fanny sabía, desde luego, lo que el Príncipe quería decir. Se había amparado en la gran fortuna de su suegro, llevándose de ella una porción de ningún modo despreciable, con la que se rodeó de un elemento en el que podría flotar, pecuniariamente hablando, teniendo en consideración el fatal peso específico que el Príncipe originariamente tenía. Al recordarlo, acudieron a la memoria de Fanny otros hechos, como lo raro que es que algunas personas, reconociéndoles todos sus méritos, desde luego, sean debidamente cotizadas en el mercado de valores, como suele decirse, y lo extraño que resulta también, y quizá más en algunos casos, que por ignoradas razones no se dé importancia a la ausencia evidente en dichas personas de aquello en virtud de cuyos méritos se les fija el precio. Fanny opinaba para sí misma y pensaba que el placer que podía proporcionarle aquel concreto ejemplar no quedaba mermado por el hecho de que el personaje en cuestión se mostrase tan predispuesto a limitarse a flotar en virtud de los méritos de otros. Y ello era así debido, en parte, a que se trataba de una clase de placeres (realmente, el Príncipe los producía) que por su misma naturaleza no podían quedar mermados, cualquiera que fuese la prueba a que se los sometiera, y en parte también se debía a que el Príncipe, evidentemente, tenía en su conciencia una especie de satisfacción por los servicios prestados. El Príncipe resultaba muy agradable siempre, indudablemente, pero ella estaba convencida de que él deseaba comportarse con la elegancia suficiente como para que esta elegancia constituyera una compensación. Que el Príncipe hubiera puesto en práctica estos propósitos por el sistema de llevar la vida, respirar el aire y casi tener los pensamientos que más satisfacían a su esposa y a su padre era consolador para Fanny, de modo que hasta hacía muy poco lo percibía con tanta claridad que incluso se sintió impulsada más de una vez a manifestarle la dicha que le proporcionaba. Sí, el Príncipe tenía esto en su favor, frente a otras cosas en contra. Sin embargo, le molestaba, lo cual no dejaba de ser un tanto raro, que éste siguiera moviéndose y le demostrara que seguía moviéndose sobre el firme terreno de la verdad. Que reconociera sus obligaciones no dejaba de tener importancia, pero ella percibía una especie de temible insinuación en la comprensión que de la verdad él tenía. Y esta insinuación apareció ante Fanny incluso en las siguientes palabras del Príncipe, pese a la ligereza con que las pronunció:

—¿Verdad que casi parece que Charlotte y yo debamos agradecer a un benefactor común el que podamos tratarnos tan íntimamente?

Para la interlocutora del Príncipe el efecto de estas palabras quedó grabado por el siguiente razonamiento:

—Muchas veces tengo la impresión de que el señor Verver también es el suegro de Charlotte. Es como si él nos hubiera salvado a los dos, pues es un hecho real en la vida de Charlotte y en la mía o, por lo menos, en nuestro corazón, que en sí mismo ya constituye un vínculo.

Hizo una pausa y prosiguió:

—¿Recuerda aquel día en que Charlotte acudió a su casa, poco antes de mi boda? ¿Recuerda de cuán franca y divertida manera hablamos en presencia de la propia Charlotte de lo aconsejable que sería que hiciera un buen matrimonio?

A continuación, mientras en el rostro angustiado de su amiga, como había ocurrido hacía poco ante Charlotte, seguía ondeando la negra bandera del rechazo general, él dijo:

—Pues bien, fue entonces, a mi juicio, cuando comenzamos la tarea de colocarla en el lugar en que se encuentra. Teníamos toda la razón y ella también. Esto queda demostrado por su actual éxito. Recomendamos un buen matrimonio casi a cualquier precio, valga la expresión, y Charlotte, interpretando nuestras palabras al pie de la letra, consiguió el mejor matrimonio que podía conseguir. A mi parecer, difícilmente hubiera podido casarse mejor, siempre y cuando reconozcamos que Charlotte está obligada a tomar dicho matrimonio como es, con todas sus características. Si no reconocemos esto, el caso es diferente, desde luego. La compensación de Charlotte radica en cierta decente libertad con la cual se contenta, a mi

juicio, sin pedir más. Usted quizá dirá que esto demuestra la bondad de Charlotte, pero yo le aseguro que no se envanece de contentarse con sólo esta libertad, sino que, al contrario, es muy humilde al respecto. Jamás reclama esta libertad y jamás la utiliza con *retentissement*, ni siquiera con el más leve *retentissement*. Goza de ella sin estridencias.

El Príncipe explicó estas palabras de modo no menos considerado y lúcido al añadir:

—El «buque» está casi siempre atracado en puerto o, si lo prefiere, anclado ante la costa. En lo que mí hace referencia, diré que de vez en cuando tengo que abandonar el buque para hacer un poco de ejercicio, y habrá usted podido darse cuenta, a poca atención que haya prestado al asunto, de que Charlotte no puede evitar de vez en cuando hacer otro tanto. En ocasiones, ni siquiera hace falta llegar a tierra, basta con saltar al agua y chapotear un poco. A que nos hayamos quedado aquí esta noche los dos juntos, al accidente que ha puesto a nuestros ilustres amigos sobre la pista de Charlotte, sí, porque reconozco que esto ha sido uno de los resultados prácticos de nuestra combinación, a todo eso puede usted calificarlo como uno de nuestros inofensivos chapuzones, saltando desde la cubierta del buque, que ni ella ni yo podemos evitar. Cuando estos chapuzones se producen, ¿por qué no considerarlos inevitables, sobre todo si tenemos en cuenta que no arriesgamos la vida? No nos ahogaremos, no nos hundiremos. Por lo menos tengo esta seguridad en lo que a mí respecta. Tampoco podemos olvidar que la señora Verver, dicho sea en su honor, sabe nadar, por cierto.

El Príncipe pudo proseguir su parlamento sin dificultad, ya que Fanny Assingham no le interrumpió. Ahora Fanny se daba cuenta de que por nada del mundo interrumpiría al Príncipe. Su elocuencia tenía un valor inmenso; no había ni una sola gota de ella que Fanny, de una manera u otra, no atrapase en el momento mismo de saltar de la fuente y la embotellara a fin de guardarla para el futuro. El frasco de cristal de la más profunda atención de Fanny Assingham recibía aquella elocuencia allí, en la misma fuente, y Fanny ya imaginaba la manera en que, en el cómodo laboratorio de su meditación, la analizaría químicamente. Y más aún, había momentos en los que, al encontrarse las miradas de los dos interlocutores, Fanny percibía en el Príncipe algo inenarrable, algo extraño y sutil que discrepaba de sus palabras, que las traicionaba, algo reluciente y muy profundo que era como una llamada, una increíble llamada dirigida a su más refinada comprensión. ¿Qué podía ser aquello? ¿No se trataba acaso, aunque fuera burda esa manera de expresar algo tan oculto, de la quintaesencia de un guiño de connivencia, de la insinuación de la posibilidad de que algún día realmente trataran los dos aquel tema —en mejores condiciones, desde luego —, con lo que resultaría mucho más interesante? Si aquella lejana chispa roja, que a la imaginación de Fanny bien hubiera podido parecerle la linterna delantera de un tren que se acercaba a ella desde el otro extremo del túnel, desde el punto de vista de Fanny, no era un *ignis fatuus*, un mero fenómeno subjetivo, forzosamente tenía que ser el Príncipe quien la mantuviera allí invitando con ella a Fanny a comprender. Sin embargo, de momento, y de una forma inconfundible, se produjo el instante en que se dio al tema comentado un tratamiento real, auténtico. Este instante se produjo cuando el Príncipe, con el mismo perfecto dominio de su pensamiento, que ni siquiera él hubiera podido mejorar, procedió a coronar su bien lograda comparación con otro símil que en realidad fue la pincelada suprema, la pincelada que el cuadro había estado esperando hasta ese momento:

—Para que la señora Verver sea intensa y exclusivamente conocida por todos como la esposa de su marido, hace falta algo de lo que, como usted sabe, el matrimonio a que nos referimos carece. El señor Verver debiera hacer lo preciso para ser un poco más conocido o, por lo menos, visto en calidad de marido de su esposa. A estas alturas, probablemente habrá podido usted comprobar que el señor Verver tiene sus propios hábitos y costumbres, que pone en práctica día a día y, cada vez más, sus propias distinciones y discriminaciones, a lo que tiene perfecto derecho, desde luego. El señor Verver es un padre tan perfecto y tan ideal y, debido precisamente a este mismo hecho, un padre político tan generoso, tan admirable y de tan fácil trato, que, a mi juicio, me comportaría de manera rastrera y baja si osara criticarle desde cualquier punto de vista. Sin embargo, ante usted puedo hacer cierta observación, ya que es usted inteligente y siempre comprende lo que intento decirle.

El Príncipe hizo una pausa, como si incluso esta única observación que acababa de anunciar fuera difícil de expresar si Fanny Assingham no le animaba a hacerla. Sin embargo, nada en el mundo hubiera podido inducir a Fanny a dar al Príncipe aquellos ánimos. Ahora tenía conciencia de que jamás en su vida había estado con el cuerpo tan quieto, ni con el ánimo tan tenso. Se sentía igual que el caballo del cuento, llevada una y otra vez al agua, por sus propias culpas, pero segura de que no podrían obligarla a beber. En otras palabras, invitada a comprender, Fanny contenía el aliento por temor a revelar que realmente comprendía,

como era verdad, por la sencilla razón de que, por fin, tenía miedo a comprender. Al mismo tiempo, Fanny comprendía con toda claridad que ya sabía de antemano cuál era la observación del Príncipe; tenía la impresión de haber oído aquellas palabras antes de que sonaran, de haber saboreado, en fin, la amargura que producirían en su especial sensibilidad. Pero su interlocutor, impulsado por una necesidad interna, exclusivamente suya, no quedó amilanado por el silencio de Fanny:

—Lo que no comprendo es por qué, desde el punto de vista del señor Verver, es decir, habida cuenta de sus afortunadas circunstancias, se sintió impulsado en su día a contraer matrimonio.

Sí, esto era exactamente lo que Fanny Assingham sabía que iba a escuchar, y estas palabras tuvieron exactamente también la prevista virtud de hacerla desdichada por las razones que ahora latían en su corazón. Sin embargo, Fanny no estaba plenamente dispuesta a sufrir, como se dice estaban los mártires, no estaba dispuesta a sufrir, odiosa e irremediablemente allí, en aquel momento, en público, pero esto sólo podía lograrlo interrumpiendo la conversación con cualquier pretexto, darla por terminada e irse. Ahora Fanny deseaba volver a casa, de la misma manera que una o dos horas antes había deseado acudir allí. Quería dejar atrás el interrogante que se había formulado en su mente y a la pareja que de repente dicho interrogante había revestido de tan vívida forma, pero Fanny consideraba que era horroroso comportarse como si huyera desconcertada. Fanny se había dado cuenta de que la conversación constituía un peligro, el peligro de la luz que se colaba por las grietas de las frases, y el franco reconocimiento de que la existencia del peligro era peor que cualquier otra cosa. No, no era eso lo peor, sino que, mientras Fanny pensaba ya en la manera en que debía emprender la retirada, aún no había reconocido que quería emprenderla. La expresión del rostro de Fanny revelaba traicioneramente su desdicha y, ante esto, Fanny no sabía qué hacer. El Príncipe dijo:

—Sin embargo, mucho me temo que, por razones ignoradas, la he dejado preocupada; le pido disculpas. Nuestras conversaciones siempre se han desarrollado a la perfección, y desde el principio fueron una gran ayuda para mí.

Este tono fue el más eficaz que podía emplearse para acelerar el colapso de Fanny; se dio cuenta de que había quedado a merced del Príncipe, y éste, al proseguir, demostró haberlo percibido claramente:

—De todas maneras, volveremos a conversar, y conversaremos mejor que nunca, ya que para mí es de suma importancia. ¿Recuerda lo que le dije un día, poco antes de mi matrimonio, con tanta claridad? ¿Recuerda que le dije que al verme obligado a moverme en tan distintas direcciones, entre tantas realidades nuevas, entre tantos misterios, circunstancias, expectativas y presunciones, todo absolutamente diferente a cuanto había conocido con anterioridad, me veía en el caso de recurrir a usted, como patrocinadora originaria, como hada madrina, que me sacara adelante?

Guardó silencio unos instantes, y añadió:

—Pues sigo considerándola igual.

Fanny se percató de que la pertinaz insistencia del Príncipe la había sacado del apuro en que se hallaba, lo cual le permitió por fin levantar la cabeza y hablar:

—Ya ha salido adelante, hace mucho tiempo que salió adelante. Y si no ha salido adelante, hubiese debido hacerlo.

—Si tenía que haber salido adelante, eso es ya una razón más para recurrir a su ayuda y que usted siga ayudándome, pues puedo asegurarle firmemente que no he salido adelante. Las nuevas realidades, y son muchísimas, siguen siendo nuevas para mí, y los misterios, las expectativas y las presunciones todavía contienen en cantidades inmensas un elemento que no he conseguido comprender. Como sea que, afortunadamente, hemos podido conversar de nuevo, debe usted permitirme que la visite lo antes posible, debe concederme una hora, una hora de su amabilidad y su bondad.

Al advertir que Fanny Assingham mantenía su reserva, el Príncipe añadió:

—Si se niega, estimaré que también niega, con indiferencia y frialdad, su propia responsabilidad.

Estas palabras demostraron, como si se tratara de un brusco golpe de mar, que la reserva de Fanny Assingham era un buque muy frágil:

—Niego que tenga responsabilidad alguna con respecto a usted. Si alguna vez la tuve, cumplí con ella.

En todos los momentos, el Príncipe había conseguido mantener una elegante sonrisa. Ahora Fanny había conseguido una vez más que le dirigiera una penetrante mirada. El Príncipe preguntó:

—¿Y para con quién confiesa usted tener responsabilidades? —¡Ah, *mio caro*, esto es asunto mío y sólo mío!

El Príncipe, sin dejar de mirarla con dureza, preguntó:

—¿Me abandona?

Esto era lo que Charlotte le había preguntado diez minutos antes, y el hecho de que el Príncipe se lo preguntara de forma casi idéntica estremeció a Fanny Assingham, que estuvo a punto de replicar: «¿Se ponen ustedes dos previamente de acuerdo acerca de lo que van a decirme?». Pero más tarde se alegró de haberse reprimido a tiempo, a pesar de que su contestación real no fue mucho mejor que la reprimida:

—Pienso que ignoro qué es lo que puedo hacer por usted.

—Debe acceder a recibirme, por lo menos.

—¡Por favor, déme tiempo para prepararme!

Ya pesar de que Fanny consiguió acompañar estas palabras con una carcajada, se vio obligada a volver la cara. Con anterioridad, en ningún momento había apartado la cara ante el Príncipe, y, para Fanny, fue lo mismo que si realmente le temiera.

Capítulo XVI

Más tarde, cuando el coche de alquiler del matrimonio pudo salir de la interminable fila de carruajes, entre la barahúnda que atormentaba la impaciencia de Fanny Assingham, ésta subió a bordo y penetró en la noche londinense, al lado de su marido, teniendo la sensación de entrar en una protectora oscuridad que le permitía envolverse en ella y respirar. Durante la media hora anterior Fanny había estado bajo una luz despiadada, hiriente y cegadora hasta sentirse obligada a bajar la vista, lo que le parecían pruebas demostrativas del error cometido. Su pensamiento más inmediato era que, en el pasado, realmente había actuado en beneficio de aquellas personas, con miras a un fin que ahora daba sus frutos, que bien podían constituir una formidable cosecha. Al principio Fanny se limitó a meditar en su rincón del coche de alquiler. Era lo mismo que ocultar la cara anteriormente al descubierto, desamparadamente descubierta; era como ocultarla en las frescas aguas de la general indiferencia, de las calles desiertas, de las tiendas cerradas y de las casas a oscuras, que formaban un mundo piadosamente inconsciente y sin reproches, contempladas desde la ventana del coche de alquiler. A diferencia del mundo que acababa de abandonar, el que ahora contemplaba no se enteraría, ni tarde ni temprano, de lo que Fanny había hecho o, por lo menos, sólo se enteraría si la consecuencia final de los actos de Fanny fuera objeto de avasalladora publicidad. Sin embargo, durante unos instantes contempló tan intensamente esta última posibilidad, que enseguida la desdicha de su miedo produjo una reacción y, cuando, al doblar la esquina, el coche quedó bajo la luz de la linterna de un policía que proyectaba el inquisidor haz en la fachada de la casa situada en la acera de enfrente, Fanny se permitió un estremecimiento al verse de tal manera acusada, a pesar de que podía protestar con igual premura contra aquel puro y ciego terror. Sí, por el momento Fanny experimentaba terror, aunque fuera absurdo, terror del que necesitaba liberarse antes de hacer las investigaciones precisas para saber en qué terreno se hallaba. Percatarse de esa necesidad tuvo realmente la virtud de ayudarla muy pronto, pues al hacer un esfuerzo con el fin mencionado, Fanny pudo advertir que, por negras que parecieran sus perspectivas, no por ello le eran desconocidas. Fanny tenía un agudo sentido de la visión, pero, a pesar de ello, se amparaba en el consuelo de no estar segura de lo que veía. No saber lo que la vista vería si se fijaba en puntos un tanto alejados constituía una ayuda para no ver que no tenía las manos limpias. Como sea que Fanny se había hallado en la situación precisa para actuar como causa agente, ciertamente no debía contemplar con tanta vaguedad los efectos que ella misma había producido. Por otra parte, esto constituyó un paso más hacia la siguiente reflexión: cuando la relación personal con cierto asunto era tan indirecta que no cabía determinarla con precisión, siempre cabía decir que fue tan leve que difícilmente podía ser deplorable. Cuanto estaban cerca de Cadogan Place advirtió que no podía ser todo lo curiosa que deseaba, sin llegar antes a la conclusión de que era inocente de toda culpa. Pero había habido un momento, en el oscuro desierto de Eaton Square, en que Fanny rompió a hablar:

—Que se defiendan a sí mismos mucho más de lo que necesitan… Sí, sólo esto me preocupa. Sí, que tengan tanto que decir en su propia defensa.

Como solía hacer en estos casos, su marido encendió un cigarro, quedando tan absorto en esta tarea como Fanny en su agitación. Luego el coronel dijo:

—¿Quieres decir con esto que tú nada tienes que decir en tu defensa?

Al ver que su esposa no daba contestación a estas palabras, añadió:

—¿Qué diablos imaginabas que iba a ocurrir? El pobre hombre se encuentra en una situación tal que no tiene absolutamente nada que hacer.

El silencio de Fanny Assingham pareció calificar de superficiales estas palabras, y sus pensamientos, como le ocurría siempre que se encontraba en compañía de su esposo, siguieron un curso independiente. Cuando estaban juntos él la inducía a hablar, pero lo hacía como si se tratase de otra persona, la cual, de hecho, la mayoría de las veces era ella misma. Sin embargo, hablaba consigo misma en presencia del coronel de un modo en que jamás hubiera podido hablar consigo sin la presencia de su esposo:

—Este hombre se ha comportado muy bien desde el principio. Siempre lo he estimado así. Maravillosamente. Y más de una vez se lo he dicho cuando se ha terciado la ocasión. En consecuencia, en consecuencia…

Pero su voz se extinguió mientras se sumía más y más en sus pensamientos. El coronel dijo:

—En consecuencia, ha adquirido el derecho, para cambiar un poco, de echar una cana al aire.

Siguiendo invariablemente el curso de sus pensamientos, Fanny Assingham dijo:

—Sin embargo, la cuestión no radica en que se porten maravillosamente cuando están separados, sino, al contrario, en que lo hagan también cuando están juntos, lo cual es harina de otro costal.

Sin gran interés, el coronel preguntó:

—¿Y qué crees tú que deben hacer cuando están juntos? Yo diría que cuanto menos hagan mejor, y ya me comprendes, supongo.

En esta ocasión la señora Assingham dio muestras de haber oído a su marido:

—Comprendo demasiado bien en qué piensas, pero yo no pienso en lo que tu insinúas.

Después de un breve silencio, completó su anterior respuesta:

—No creo, querido, que sea necesario tener pensamientos bajos y mezquinos con respecto a esta pareja. Son las últimas personas en el mundo capaces de portarse de la manera que sospechas.

El coronel advirtió:

—Con nadie soy bajo y mezquino, salvo con mi pródiga esposa. Me llevo bien con todos mis amigos, tal como yo los valoro; sin embargo, soy incapaz de aceptar el valor que tú les atribuyes. Y no hablemos ya de lo que ocurre cuando te dedicas a sumar valores…

Tras estas palabras, el coronel soltó una bocanada de humo, y su esposa observó:

—Mis sumas carecen de importancia cuando no eres tú quien tiene que pagar la factura.

Después de decir estas palabras, sus meditaciones volvieron a perderse por el aire:

—Lo más importante es que cuando vino a buscarla tan de repente no tenía miedo. Si hubiera estado atemorizado habría podido evitarlo. Y si yo hubiera visto que lo estaba, si yo no hubiera visto que no lo estaba…

Después de meditar, la señora Assingham concluyó:

—Entonces yo hubiera podido verlo. Lo habría visto. Nuevos pensamientos le indujeron a añadir:

—Y es verdad que para ella se trataba de una gran cosa, de una oportunidad que pocas veces se da en la vida, por lo que difícilmente podía dejar de aceptarla. Y me gustó que él no se lo impidiera llevado por su propio temor. Era maravilloso que se le deparara a ella tal oportunidad. El único problema que podía presentarse era que Charlotte se sintiera incapaz de afrontar la situación. Si ella no hubiera tenido confianza, habríamos podido hablar. Pero la tenía, y mucha, la tenía toda.

Pacientemente Bob Assingham preguntó:

—¿Es que le has preguntado hasta qué punto tenía confianza?

El coronel había formulado la pregunta con muy modestas esperanzas, como de costumbre, acerca de la contestación que obtendría, pero esta vez había tocado el más sensible resorte de reacción de su esposa:

—Jamás, jamás… No era el momento de «preguntar». Preguntar es sugerir, y no era el momento de sugerir. Allí una tenía que hacerse su propia idea de la forma más secreta posible y con los elementos de juicio que una tenía a su disposición. Y juzgo, tal como he dicho, que Charlotte estimaba que podía afrontar la situación. Sí, me causó la impresión en aquellos momentos de estar casi conmovedoramente agradecida, a pesar de lo orgullosa que es. Pero jamás le perdonaré haber olvidado a la persona a quien debe estar primordialmente agradecida.

—¿No será la señora Assingham, por casualidad?

Fanny nada dijo durante unos instantes, ya que, a fin de cuentas, había alternativas. Luego, declaró:

—Es Maggie, por supuesto. La pequeña y asombrosa Maggie.

Mientras con lúgubre expresión miraba hacia el exterior por la ventanilla del coche, el coronel

Assingham preguntó:

—¿También Maggie es asombrosa?

La esposa del coronel, hecha un ovillo en el rincón del carruaje, proyectó hacia el exterior una mirada idéntica a la de su marido:

—Muy extraño me parecería que no comenzara a ver ahora en esa muchacha, a la que siempre hemos considerado como un ser insignificante y adorable, mucho más valor del que jamás llegué a pensar que tenía.

Resignado, el coronel comentó:

—Tratándose de ti, no me parece extraño:

Una vez más la señora Assingham hizo caso omiso de las palabras de su marido. Al cabo de un rato, rompió el silencio.

—En realidad, y ahora comienzo a darme cuenta de ello, Maggie es la gran salvación. Sí, lo veo. Ella será quien nos saque del atolladero. En realidad, no le quedará más remedio que hacerlo. Y podrá hacerlo.

Pincelada tras pincelada, la meditación de la señora Assingham terminó el cuadro, que produjo, en el particular sentido que su marido tenía del método, tales efectos que indujeron a éste a desahogarse de forma un tanto caprichosa, allí en su rincón, mediante una exclamación ahora frecuente en sus labios, que estaba encaminada a aliviar el agobio que solía experimentar principalmente en situaciones como la presente, exclamación cuyo origen había descubierto Fanny en los modales aborígenes, aunque siempre deliciosos, del señor Verver.

—¡Oh, Señor Dios, Señor Dios…!

La señora Assingham prosiguió:

—Desde luego, si es capaz, lo será de manera extraordinaria, y en eso precisamente pienso.

La señora Assingham guardó silencio, aunque sólo para añadir:

—Pero no estoy muy segura en lo tocante a la persona a quien, honradamente hablando, Charlotte debe más gratitud. Incluso pienso que quizá esta persona sea el menudo e increíble idealista que la hizo su esposa.

Rápidamente, el coronel comentó:

—Pues más vale que no lo pienses, querida. ¡Charlotte, esposa de un menudo e increíble idealista…!

Una vez más, sólo el cigarro del coronel Assingham pudo expresar el resto de la frase.

Con el recuerdo reavivado y con una plena visión del caso, Fanny observó:

—Sin embargo, a poco que se piense, ¿no causaba la impresión de que era esto lo que Charlotte estaba más o menos convencida que iba a ser?

Estas palabras fueron la causa de que el consorte de Fanny Assingham quedara verdaderamente un tanto pasmado:

—¿Qué dices? ¿Charlotte, una menuda e increíble idealista?

Con toda sencillez, ella prosiguió como si tal cosa:

—Y era sincera. Era inconfundiblemente sincera. El único problema radica en saber hasta qué punto sigue siéndolo todavía. Bob Assingham dijo:

—Pues, oye, ésta es otra de las preguntas que puedes formularle. Parece que todo tienes que hacerlo como si se tratara de un juego con un reglamento fijado de antemano, pero realmente no sé quién podrá sancionarte en el caso de que tú infrinjas las normas. ¿No será que puedes dar tres respuestas, a ver si aciertas una, como en las adivinanzas de Nochebuena?

El sarcasmo del coronel dejó impertérrita a su digna esposa, por lo que Bob Assingham añadió:

—¿Y cuánta sinceridad o qué cantidad de cualquier otra cosa necesitas en Charlotte para seguir dándole al asunto?

En tono un tanto siniestro, repuso:

—Proseguiré mientras quede una porción tan pequeña como una uña de tus dedos, aunque afortunadamente no nos encontramos aún en esa situación.

La señora Assingham hizo otra pausa, contemplando ahora la más amplia perspectiva en la que repentinamente las obligaciones de la señora Verver para con Maggie quedaban en gran manera ampliadas. Habló de nuevo:

—Incluso en el caso de que Charlotte nada debiera a los demás, por lo menos tendría la obligación de un comportamiento impecable para con el Príncipe.

Ahora Fanny se preguntó a sí misma.

—¿Qué ha hecho el Príncipe sino confiar generosamente en ella? ¿Qué hizo sino interpretar que, si Charlotte estaba dispuesta a aceptar se debía a que se sentía suficientemente fuerte? Indudablemente, esto impone a Charlotte el deber de tener la debida consideración con el Príncipe, de pagar la confianza en ella depositada, lo cual… Bueno, sí, lo cual… En fin, que si de ello no hace norma constante de su comportamiento, se portaría muy censurablemente. Con esto me refiero, desde luego, a la confianza de que Charlotte no se mezclaría en la vida del Príncipe como él expresó al guardar silencio en los momentos críticos.

El coche de alquiler estaba ya muy cerca del hogar de los Assingham, y quizá por ello el coronel tuvo la sensación de dejar de hablar, lo que motivó que su meditación siguiente floreciera de un modo que casi sorprendió a su esposa. Los cónyuges estaban principalmente unidos por la paciencia del coronel, casi siempre a punto de agotarse y, debido a esto, la nota predominante en las frases del marido solía ser la de la benévola desesperación. A pesar de ello, en este momento, el coronel puso tasa a su desesperación hasta el punto de reconocer virtualmente que había seguido el razonamiento de su esposa:

—¿Gratitud al Príncipe por no haberle puesto la zancadilla? ¿Quieres decir que esto, debidamente interpretado, ha de ser precisamente lo que determine el camino que Charlotte deba seguir?

Fanny, aceptando esta tesis, dio énfasis al matiz expresado por su marido:

—Debidamente interpretado.

—Pero ¿no queda todo subordinado a lo que Charlotte estime debida interpretación?

—No. No depende de nada. Es así como el deber y la delicadeza sólo ofrecen un camino.

En reacción un tanto vulgar, Bob Assingham exclamó:

—¡Oh, la delicadeza!

—Me refiero a la delicadeza en su más elevada acepción, a la delicadeza moral. Charlotte es perfectamente capaz de darse cuenta de eso. La delicadeza moral le impone el deber de dejar al Príncipe en paz.

Con brusquedad, el coronel preguntó a su esposa:

—¿De modo que has llegado a convencerte de que toda la culpa recae en la pobre Charlotte, y que ella es la única que actúa?

Tanto si el coronel lo hizo con esa intención como si no, lo cierto es que la brusquedad de sus palabras tuvo la virtud de obligar a Fanny a volver la cara y mirar a su marido. Fue un golpe que le hizo perder el equilibrio, un golpe que la dejó de repente sin su recién adquirida seguridad. Fanny Assingham dijo:

—¿Es que no piensas lo mismo? ¿Realmente crees que hay algo entre los dos?

El movimiento efectuado por ella obligó a su marido, una vez más, a echarse hacia atrás. Aquel avance anterior le había hecho sentir la alta temperatura del tema abordado. El coronel dijo:

—Quizá lo único que Charlotte haga sea mostrar al Príncipe lo mucho que le deja en paz. Sí, mostrárselo todos los días.

—¿Y acaso fue eso lo que Charlotte mostró al Príncipe cuando le esperó en la escalinata de la manera que tú me has dicho? —¿En verdad te dije la manera como le esperó?

Evidentemente por falta de costumbre el coronel apenas podía reconocerse a sí mismo en aquella acusación.

—Sí, por una vez en la vida. En aquellas pocas palabras que intercambiamos, después de haberlos observado mientras subían la escalinata, algo me dijiste de lo que habías visto. No me dijiste gran cosa, claro está; eso jamás lo harías, aunque te fuera la vida en ello. Pero pude darme cuenta de que, por muy extraño que parezca, quedaste impresionado; en consecuencia, pensé que forzosamente tuvo que ocurrir algo extraordinario para que tú lo mencionaras.

Ahora Fanny Assingham lanzó un ataque frontal contra su marido, ante quien había esgrimido su demostrada percepción en aquel caso concreto, debido a que en su inseguridad necesitaba sacar el debido fruto de ella. Ahora se daba cuenta, incluso con más claridad que en el momento de los hechos, de que su marido había quedado impresionado por algo; sí, incluso él, pobre hombre, había quedado impresionado. Y para que esto ocurriera, para que pudiera impresionarle, era realmente preciso que fuese muy gordo. Fanny intentó acorralarle, atacarle hasta obligarle a rendirse, para que le dijera sencillamente la verdad, cuyo valor radicaría precisamente en la sencillez, verdad que una vez conseguida Fanny conservaría para ulterior referencia, sin perder ni un matiz de la misma. Fanny dijo:

—Vamos, vamos, querido, que algo pensabas. Después de haber visto lo que viste, no pudiste resistir la tentación de pensar un poco. Sólo te pido que me digas lo que pensaste. En esta ocasión, tus ideas valen

tanto como las mías y, cuando hables, no podrás acusarme, como de costumbre, de ser sólo yo quien imagina cosas. Ahora sabes más que yo. Te encuentras en un punto más avanzado y yo sigo en el mismo punto. Pero me doy cuenta de cuál es el punto en que te encuentras, y mucho te agradeceré que me sitúes en él. Lo único que quiero es que me des una *point de repère* fuera de mí misma, y así podré meditar, meditar lo que tú me digas.

Mientras Fanny hablaba, el vehículo que los transportaba se detuvo ante la puerta de su casa; otro hecho valioso para Fanny fue el que su marido no se moviera, a pesar de hallarse sentado junto a la portezuela por la que debían bajar. Se hallaban a expensas de la ama de llaves, debido a que el servicio ya se había ido a dormir, así que como no les acompañaba ningún lacayo, el cochero aguardaba tranquilamente. De esta manera Bob Assingham esperó, consciente de las razones que tenía, para dar contestación a la pregunta de su mujer por otro método que no fuera el que saltaba a la vista, o sea darle la espalda y bajar del coche. Bob Assingham no volvió la cara hacia el otro lado, se dedicó a mirar fijamente al frente mientras su esposa hallaba, en el hecho de que el coronel no se moviera, cuantas pruebas podía desear, es decir, cuantas pruebas demostrativas de lo que ella acababa de decir. A Fanny Assingham le constaba que el coronel jamás hacía caso de lo que ella decía, y el hecho de que ahora dejara escapar la oportunidad de demostrarlo era de suma elocuencia. Por fin, el coronel observó:

—Más vale dejar este asunto en manos de esos dos.

Fanny inquirió:

—¿«Dejar el asunto»?

—Dejémoslos en paz. Ya se las arreglarán.

—¿Quieres decir que ya se las arreglarán para hacer todo lo que quieran? ¡Lo has dicho! ¡Tú mismo lo has dicho!

Casi sibilinamente, el coronel dijo:

—Se las arreglarán a su manera.

Esto produjo sus efectos en Fanny, ya que, además de la luz que arrojó sobre el fenómeno de la endurecida conciencia de su marido, pudo percatarse de la gran verdad que había en la acusación concreta de la que antes había hecho objeto a su marido. La evocación de la escena era realmente maravillosa para Fanny, quien dijo:

—¿Se las arreglarán con gran astucia, verdad? ¿Esto es lo que piensas? ¿De manera que nadie se enterará? ¿Y que nosotros haremos cuanto de nosotros se espera si nos limitamos a protegerlos?

El coronel, sentado, inmóvil, declinó la invitación a expresar sus pensamientos. Las manifestaciones verbales se parecían mucho a las teorías, en el sentido de que uno siempre acababa extraviándose. El coronel sólo sabía lo que decía, y lo que sabía representaba la limitada vibración de la que su inveterada dureza era capaz. A pesar de todo, tenía que aclarar cuál era la posición que había adoptado en aquel asunto, a cuyo efecto esperó un poco más. Pero por fin lo hizo por tercera vez y con las mismas palabras:

—Se las arreglarán a su manera.

Acto seguido, bajó del coche.

Oh, sí, esto produjo sus efectos en la señora Assingham, quien, mientras el coronel subía los peldaños, se limitó a mirarle, quieta, y seguir mirándole mientras abría la puerta. El vestíbulo estaba iluminado; el coronel se quedó en el marco de la puerta, mirando a su esposa; su alta y flaca figura recortada en negro, con el sombrero marcial, casi diabólicamente inclinado a un lado, como solía llevarlo, parecía prolongar el siniestro énfasis de sus anteriores palabras. Generalmente, en esta clase de regreso al hogar, el coronel solía ir en busca de su esposa después de haber preparado el acto de entrada, por lo que, con su actual actitud, parecía tener vergüenza de enfrentarse con ella a corta distancia. El coronel miraba a su cónyuge desde la puerta, mientras ésta, sentada, sopesaba las palabras de su marido y tenía la impresión de que el cuadro mental que de aquel problema se había formado quedaba bruscamente iluminado. ¿Qué era, si no, lo que sencillamente vio escrito en la cara del Príncipe, que se hallaba bajo sus palabras? ¿Acaso no se correspondía exactamente con la burlona imagen que tenía ahora ante la vista? ¿Acaso, dicho sea llanamente, no era la promesa de que ellos se las «arreglarían a su manera» lo que él había querido proponerle a Fanny, para que ella tuviera oportunidad de aceptarla? En cierta manera, el tono en que el coronel hablaba armonizaba con la expresión de Americo, aquella expresión que de una forma tan extraña había aparecido ante Fanny, mirándola por encima del hombro. Fanny no había sabido interpretarla en aquel momento, pero ¿acaso no la interpretaba ahora correctamente, mientras veía en ella la insinuación de que debía recibir una lección? No, no aceptaría esa clase de lecciones. Fanny Assingham, mientras oía que

su marido le decía: «¿Se puede saber qué pasa?», decidió también tomarse el tiempo preciso para decidir que no se dejaría atemorizar. «¿Qué pasa?», pues sí, pasaba más de lo suficiente para que Fanny se sintiera un poco mareada. Sí, no era el Príncipe la persona a quien ella estaba dispuesta a considerar primordialmente veleidosa. La veleidad de Charlotte —quizá Fanny había llegado incluso a considerarla aceptable— sólo podía plantear, a lo sumo, problemas de fácil resolución. En consecuencia, si el Príncipe había llegado al punto que ahora suponía Fanny, el asunto tomaba un cariz muy diferente. No, ahora no cabía tomar partido por uno o por otro. Fanny se sentía impotente, hasta el punto de que el tiempo pasaba y pasaba sin que bajara del coche de alquiler, por lo que el coronel tuvo que acudir junto a ella y sacarla casi a rastras, después de lo cual, ya en la acera, bajo la luz de la farola, su silencio bien habría podido ser el signo de la existencia de algo grave; este silencio llegó a su culminación cuando su marido le ofreció el brazo; los dos subieron los peldaños sumisamente juntos, unidos, igual que un nuevo Darby y una nueva Joan que hubieran sufrido un contratiempo. Aquello casi parecía el regreso de un entierro, a no ser que se asemejara más al silencioso avance hacia un hogar enlutado. Sí, por cuanto ¿a qué regresaba Fanny a su casa, como no fuera a enterrar de la forma más decente posible su error?

Capítulo XVII

Al parecer, los dos miembros de la pareja podían gozar de extraordinaria libertad desde el instante en que comprendieron sus respectivas posiciones. Como es natural, desde un principio Charlotte se había esforzado grandemente en hacer comprender al Príncipe la necesidad de lo anterior. Charlotte había hallado frecuentes ocasiones de hablarle de esta necesidad, y con su resignación un tanto menguada o, por lo menos, con su ingenio estimulado, con inevitable ironía Charlotte había calificado de diferentes maneras el caso en que los dos se hallaban. Lo más maravilloso consistía en que el sentido de la decencia había estado siempre muy alerta en Charlotte al referirse al asunto. Momentos hubo en que hablaba de refugiarse los dos en lo que denominaba el más sencillo y vulgar tacto, como si este principio bastara para iluminar su camino. En otros momentos bien hubiese podido parecer, a juzgar por las palabras de Charlotte, que el rumbo que los dos debían seguir requería el más ansioso estudio y la más independiente, por no decir la más original, interpretación de los síntomas y de los signos. Ahora Charlotte hablaba como si el itinerario a seguir estuviera indicado en todas las encrucijadas con carteles de casi ridícula prominencia. Después hablaba como si la senda fuera oculta y sinuosa, entre zarzas y matojos. Incluso había ocasiones en las que se expresaba como si, al carecer la situación de los dos de precedentes, su cielo careciese de estrellas.

«¿Hacer?», dijo en cierta ocasión Charlotte haciéndose eco de la palabra pronunciada por el Príncipe, en una de las conversaciones que disimulada y brevemente sostenían al regresar Charlotte de su visita a América, inmediatamente después de su matrimonio, visita que ella consideraba como una excursión de la misma extraña naturaleza que aquella que también el Príncipe tuvo que efectuar. «¿Acaso la inmensa, la verdaderamente incomparable belleza de nuestra situación, no radica en que no tenemos nada que “hacer” en toda la vida? Nada, salvo lo usual, lo necesario, lo cotidiano, que consiste en comportarse de la forma menos insensata posible. Esto es todo, y lo dicho puede aplicarse a cualquier período. Ha habido mucho que “hacer”, sin duda habrá aún mucho más que “hacer”, pero todo lo que se deba hacer corre a cargo de ellos, por ser lo resultante de lo que nos han hecho a nosotros.» Y Charlotte indicó que la cuestión radicaba íntegramente en haber aceptado ellos dos las cosas tal como se las presentaron, y con la mayor discreción posible. Sin la menor duda, jamás había ocurrido nada tan raro a una pareja consciente, dotada de buenas intenciones y perfectamente pasiva. Nunca se había dictado contra víctimas como ellos tan extraordinario decreto como el que los obligaba, en contra de su voluntad, a sostener una relación de estrecha reciprocidad, que ellos habrían hecho lo que estaba en su mano para evitar.

Charlotte recordaría, y no poco, aquella concreta mirada, largamente sostenida en silencio, que el Príncipe le dirigió cuando aludió a los primeros intentos de escapar a su destino. Recordaría también gozosamente la expresión muda que el tono de su voz hizo aparecer en los irresistibles ojos del Príncipe; Charlotte consideraba con orgullo y alegría que, en aquella ocasión, había conseguido ver que en la mirada no había dudas, ni interrogantes ni retos, ni nada de esta o parecida naturaleza. El Príncipe se hallaba lo bastante desprevenido como para dar muestras de cierta admiración, al pensar en lo mucho que los dos habían luchado en contra de su destino; Charlotte sabía muy bien, desde luego, en lo tocante a todo esto, qué era lo que se hallaba en el fondo del pensamiento del Príncipe, y cómo habrían sonado las palabras del Príncipe si, discretamente, no hubiera evitado pronunciarlas. Todos los hombres eran lo bastante brutos como para aprovechar, cuando se les ofrecían, estas ocasiones de protesta, pero el Príncipe se distinguía por

ser uno de los pocos hombres capaces de contenerse, antes de dejarse llevar por sus impulsos. Evidentemente, ésta era la base de la delicadeza de un hombre. Si el amigo de Charlotte hubiera hablado más de la cuenta, habría dicho en su simplicidad: «¿Realmente hicimos todo lo preciso para evitarlo, cuando nos enfrentamos con esos notables matrimonios?». Desde luego, lo hubiera dicho con toda elegancia, utilizando el plural, aceptando la parte que en el caso le correspondía a modo de tributo a la memoria del telegrama que Charlotte había recibido de él en París, después de que el señor Verver le enviara a Roma la noticia de su compromiso matrimonial. Charlotte jamás había destruido este telegrama en el que el joven matrimonio aceptaba la propuesta que se les formulaba, aceptación en modo alguno forzada. Charlotte conservaba el telegrama en lugar seguro y muy a escondidas; de vez en cuando lo sacaba para volver a leerlo. En francés, el telegrama decía: «*À la guerre comme à la guerre*, debemos vivir tal como entendemos la vida, pero me encanta su valentía y casi me sorprendo de la mía». El mensaje en sí era ambiguo y Charlotte le había dado diversas interpretaciones. Podía muy bien significar que, incluso sin Charlotte, la carrera del Príncipe era un trayecto cuesta arriba para él, una constante lucha para mantener las apariencias, por lo que, si Charlotte y él volvían a vivir el uno cerca del otro, esto comportaría que el Príncipe tendría que vivir con más precauciones todavía. Pero, por otra parte, también podía significar que el Príncipe se consideraba notablemente feliz en su vivir y que, en consecuencia, y en la medida que Charlotte se considerase un peligro, debía considerar que el Príncipe se estaba preparado de antemano a este efecto, y que se hallaba seguro y en sazón. Sin embargo, cuando llegó a París en compañía de su esposa, Charlotte no le pidió explicación alguna, de la misma manera que él tampoco le preguntó si guardaba el telegrama. Todo parecía indicar que el Príncipe se encontraba muy por encima de hacer semejante pregunta, de la misma manera que ella se juzgaba muy por encima de decir al Príncipe, sin que éste la invitara a ello, que al instante había ofrecido el telegrama al señor Verver con perfecta franqueza y honestidad y que, si le hubiera dicho tan sólo una palabra indicativa de su deseo de leerlo, Charlotte lo habría puesto en sus manos. En consecuencia, también se había abstenido de decir al Príncipe que estaba absolutamente convencida de que mostrar el telegrama al señor Verver habría producido, con toda probabilidad, e inmediatamente, el efecto de anular los proyectos matrimoniales, y que todo el futuro de Charlotte durante aquellos instantes había quedado pendiente de un hilo, el hilo de la delicadeza del señor Verver (así consideraba Charlotte que debía llamarse), y que la posición de Charlotte en lo tocante a responsabilidades era absolutamente inexpugnable.

Entretanto, para el Príncipe, el tiempo, en su medido fluir, había sido originariamente una gran ayuda; le había ayudado en el sentido de que no disponía del tiempo suficiente para cometer una insensatez. A pesar de ello, este accesorio elemento era el que ahora parecía aguardar al acecho con maravillosa paciencia. Al principio, el tiempo había engendrado principalmente separaciones, dilaciones e intervalos; pero después dejó de ser una ayuda de manera harto temible desde el momento en que comenzó a abundar más y más, hasta el punto de inducir al Príncipe a preguntarse qué podía hacer con él. El estado matrimonial exigía menos tiempo de lo que, en términos generales, había esperado; y, cosa más extraña todavía, menos tiempo del que él había esperado en un matrimonio como el suyo. Le constaba que había razones lógicas para explicarlo, una lógica que demostraba esta verdad hasta el punto de darle carácter evidente. De una forma clara, el señor Verver ayudaba al Príncipe, es decir, le ayudaba en su condición de casado, y le ayudaba tanto que esta ayuda tenía carácter decisivo. El grado en que el señor Verver le rendía este servicio era realmente notable, aunque ¿qué servicio suyo no había sido notable desde el día en que los dos se conocieron? El Príncipe vivía, el Príncipe había vivido durante los últimos cuatro o cinco años de los servicios que le prestaba el señor Verver, verdad tan evidente cuando el Príncipe consideraba estos servicios uno a uno por separado para valorarlos, como cuando los arrojaba todos juntos dentro de la general olla de su gratitud, para dejarlos que se cocieran poco a poco hasta dar un nutritivo caldo. El Príncipe era hombre especialmente dispuesto a emplear el método mencionado en segundo lugar, a pesar de lo cual, de vez en cuando, cogía un bocado aislado para saborearlo solo. En estas ocasiones, maravilloso parecía al Príncipe el sabor de aquella sabrosa golosina, gozada a costa del señor Verver, que de día en día gustaba más y más al Príncipe. Había sido preciso que transcurrieran meses y meses para que pudiera gozar plenamente de aquel bocado. Al principio, no pudo hallar el nombre adecuado a aquel motivo de su más profundo agradecimiento, y en el momento en que en su mente surgió el nombre, nuestro joven amigo ya vivía con la paz y la tranquilidad que ello le garantizaba. Dicho en pocas palabras, el señor Verver había asumido la responsabilidad de las relaciones del Príncipe con Maggie, de la misma forma que había asumido la responsabilidad, y siempre la asumiría, de todo lo demás. El señor Verver le había exonerado de todo

género de angustias y ansiedades en lo tocante a su vida matrimonial —así se lo había hecho— y asimismo en lo tocante a su cuenta bancaria. De la misma manera que el señor Verver cumplía con la función nombrada en segundo término por el medio de estar en comunicación con los banqueros, la primera nacía directamente del excelente entendimiento recíproco con su hija. Este entendimiento tenía, y ello era tan maravilloso como sumamente evidente, la misma profunda intimidad que el entendimiento comercial, ya que, a fin de cuentas, las asociaciones financieras se basaban, en el fondo, en la comunidad de intereses. Desde el punto de vista del Príncipe la armonía entre padre e hija se debía a la identidad de caracteres, lo cual, por fortuna, antes le divertía que le irritaba, cuando muy bien hubiera podido ocurrir lo contrario. Aquellas personas —y la libre asociación del Príncipe amontonaba sin orden ni concierto a capitalistas y banqueros, a hombres de negocios retirados, a ilustres coleccionistas, a suegros norteamericanos, a padres norteamericanos, a jóvenes hijas norteamericanas, a lindas esposas norteamericanas—, aquellas personas, decía, pertenecían al mismo amplio grupo de seres afortunados, por lo menos a la misma especie general, y tenían, generalmente hablando, los mismos instintos. Se juntaban, se comunicaban secretos, hablaban el mismo idioma y se hacían recíprocos favores. Y ya que hablamos de favores, en determinado momento el joven Príncipe advirtió que su relación con Maggie, según cabía ver, también había sido asumida por el señor Verver. Lo cual constituía, en realidad, el meollo del asunto. Se trataba de una situación «graciosa», aunque tan graciosa como afortunada. La vida matrimonial de la joven pareja quedaba en entredicho, pero, cosa sorprendente, tenían la solución allí mismo, ante ellos. El Príncipe nada tenía que objetar, ya que el señor Verver sólo procuraba y conseguía la mayor dicha de Maggie, y ésta tampoco tenía nada que objetar ya que el señor Verver, con su comportamiento, contribuía a la dicha de su marido.

Sin embargo, el hecho de que el tiempo, como hemos dicho, no siempre estuviera íntegramente a favor del Príncipe, quedó claramente de manifiesto un oscuro día en que, por unas extrañas aunque no sin precedente circunstancias, las reflexiones a las que acabamos de hacer referencia ofreciéronse al Príncipe a modo y manera de su principal recreo. Al parecer, estas reflexiones y sólo éstas habían recibido la misión de llenar las horas del Príncipe e incluso de llenar la gran casa cuadrada de Portland Place, en donde la escala de cualquiera de las más pequeñas salitas resultaba incluso excesiva para ellas. El Príncipe penetró en esta estancia para ver si por casualidad encontraba allí a la Princesa tomando el té. Pero aun cuando el resplandeciente servicio del refrigerio se hallaba allí, junto a la chimenea, no cabía decir lo mismo de quien hubiera podido honrar la mesa, por lo que el Príncipe la esperó, si cabe llamar a eso espera, recorriendo una y otra vez el brillante suelo de la estancia. El Príncipe no hubiera podido hallar razón alguna que explicara por qué deseaba ver a la Princesa en aquel momento, y el hecho de que ella no viniera pasada media hora llegó a ser en realidad, con carácter plenamente positivo pero no por eso menos perverso, la circunstancia que mantuvo al Príncipe en el lugar en que se encontraba. Aquél, precisamente aquél, era el lugar en que podía pensar mejor, el lugar en que podía percibir mejor la nota destacada de la realidad. No cabe duda de que esta observación constituía en sí un pobre motivo de solaz en aquella pequeña y sórdida crisis. Pero el constante ir y venir del Príncipe y, de manera principal, sus reiteradas detenciones ante alguna de las altas ventanas de la estancia, dieron a cada uno de los minutos que discurrían, al cabo del tiempo, la calidad de acelerado latido del espíritu. Sin embargo, no cabe decir que estos latidos expresaran debidamente la impaciencia del deseo, en mayor medida que la aguda desilusión. La serie de minutos, conjuntamente considerada, quizá se parecía más que a cualquier otra cosa a esas sutiles oleadas de claridad por medio de las cuales, para el observador, el alba, por fin, temblando, se transformaba en rosado día. La iluminación afectaba en su totalidad a la mente, y las perspectivas que revelaba eran puramente la inmensidad del mundo del pensamiento. De todas maneras el mundo material era muy diferente. La tarde de marzo, contemplada desde la ventana, parecía haberse extraviado en el otoño, había llovido durante horas, y el calor de la lluvia, el color del aire y del barro, el color de las casas fronteras, el color de la vida en aquella broma tan triste, en aquella mascarada tan idiota, era de un castaño indeciblemente sucio. Para nuestro joven amigo ni siquiera al principio fue leve el interés que en él despertó el que un coche de alquiler de cuatro ruedas y de lento balanceo alterara, mientras él lo contemplaba, la dirección que seguía, apartándose torpemente de la zona central de la calzada, evidentemente a instancias de la persona que en su interior viajaba, y comenzara a dirigirse hacia la acera de la izquierda para detenerse, siguiendo ulteriores instrucciones, ante las ventanas de su casa. La persona que viajaba en el interior del vehículo, del que se apeó en grácil movimiento, resultó ser una señora que dejó el vehículo esperándola y que, sin guarecerse bajo el paraguas, cruzó rápidamente el húmedo trecho que la separaba de la casa. Cruzó deprisa y desapareció, pero el Príncipe, desde su alto puesto de observación, había tenido tiempo de reconocerla, y

el acto del reconocimiento le dejó inmóvil durante unos minutos.

Charlotte Stant, viajera en un maltratado coche de alquiler y con impermeable, acudiendo a su lado a aquella hora en el momento culminante de su especial visión interior, constituyó una aparición con una carga de coherencia tal que al Príncipe casi le pareció violenta. El efecto de que Charlotte acudiera a visitarle a él solo, tenía para el Príncipe, mientras esperaba inmóvil, una singular intensidad, pero después de que transcurrieran unos minutos, su certidumbre con referencia a lo anterior comenzó a menguar. Quizá Charlotte no había venido, quizá había venido sólo para ver a Maggie, quizá al enterarse en el vestíbulo de que la Princesa no había regresado, estaba dejando un mensaje, escribiendo unas palabras en una tarjeta. De todas maneras, pronto sabría la verdad; entretanto, dominándose, nada haría. La idea de no actuar adquirió bruscamente extraordinaria fuerza. Sin duda alguna Charlotte sabría que él se hallaba en casa, pero el Príncipe estaba dispuesto a que la visita que le hiciera fuese íntegramente por iniciativa de ella. Las razones que el Príncipe tenía para dejarla en plena libertad eran todavía más notables si tenemos en consideración que a pesar de no quebrantar su pasividad albergaba fervientes esperanzas. La armonía de la aparición de Charlotte en unas circunstancias superficiales que tan adversas le eran, constituía una armonía con unas circunstancias que no cabía calificar de superficiales, y la imaginación del Príncipe daba un valor extraordinario a la presencia de Charlotte. Además este valor adquiría extraña profundidad si se tenía en consideración el rigor de la actitud del Príncipe, así como el que, a pesar de haber aguzado el oído, no había percibido el sonido de la puerta de entrada al abrirse y cerrarse de nuevo, ni había visto a Charlotte regresar al coche de alquiler, y esa sensación llegó a su punto culminante cuando se dio cuenta, merced a sus agudizados sentidos, de que Charlotte había llegado, precedida por el mayordomo, después de subir la escalera, a la antesala de la estancia en que él se hallaba. Si algo hubiera podido aumentar todavía más esas sensaciones del Príncipe, ese algo fue la nueva pausa, ante la estancia, como si Charlotte hubiese dicho al criado: «Espere un momento». Sin embargo, cuando el criado dio entrada a Charlotte, y se acercó a la mesa de té para encender el hornillo de la tetera, y luego se dedicó lenta y metódicamente a atizar el fuego del hogar, Charlotte consiguió que su anfitrión no tuviera dificultad alguna en descender del punto en que su alta tensión le había situado, y recibirla provisionalmente haciendo referencia a Maggie. Mientras el mayordomo estuvo presente, Maggie fue la persona a quien Charlotte había venido a ver, y Maggie sería a quien —a pesar de la total indiferencia del doméstico referente a las posibles intenciones de la dama visitante— Charlotte, alegremente, junto al fuego, esperaría. Sin embargo, tan pronto como quedaron los dos solos, Charlotte ascendió, como el silbido y la roja luz del cohete, de las formalidades a los hechos, y dijo, sin ambages, allí, en pie ante el Príncipe:

—¿Qué más, querido, qué otra cosa podemos hacer, en este mundo?

Fue como si en aquel instante el Príncipe supiera la razón por la que durante horas había tenido las sensaciones que tuvo; fue como si se enterara, en aquel instante, de cosas que ni justicia había sabido, mientras Charlotte esperaba ante la puerta de la salita, jadeante, con un jadeo que parecía producido por el ascenso de la escalera. Sin embargo, al mismo tiempo, sabía que Charlotte todavía sabía más que él en lo tocante a todos los signos y portentos que pudieran afectar a los dos; la visión que el Príncipe tenía de las alternativas —en realidad no sabía como llamarlas, aunque quizá fueran soluciones, satisfacciones…— quedó totalmente iluminada por la tangible verdad de la actitud de Charlotte junto al hogar, por la manera en que le miraba como si en el lugar en que se encontraba se hallara en una situación ventajosa conquistada para ella. Charlotte había puesto la mano derecha en la repisa de mármol y con la izquierda mantenía recogida la falda para tenerla apartada del fuego, en tanto que estaba con un pie adelantado hacia el fuego para que se secara el zapato. El Príncipe no hubiera podido decir qué concretos eslabones y puentes habían quedado restablecidos al cabo de pocos minutos, y así era porque no recordaba ocasión alguna, en Roma, de la que el actual cuadro fuera exacta copia. Es decir, no recordaba ninguna ocasión en la que Charlotte le hubiera visitado en una tarde lluviosa, mientras un embarrado coche de alquiler la esperaba. Hallábase, a pesar de haber dejado el impermeable en la planta baja, investida de la extraña elocuencia —de carácter claramente pintoresco, teniendo en cuenta todas las circunstancias anejas— conferida por un vestido harto discreto y un sombrerito negro, que parecían empeñados en resaltar el momento de la vida en que se encontraba, así como sus intenciones morales, las del sombrero y las del vestido, y también su irónica indiferencia reflejada en su bello rostro refrescado por la lluvia. Sin embargo, la noción del pasado renació en el Príncipe como en ningún momento anterior, de modo que el pasado coincidía con el futuro, se entrelazaba con él, ante su vista, como en un largo abrazo, prietos los brazos y unidos los labios, de modo que el presente era tan dominado y zarandeado que su pobre naturaleza quedaba casi sin la sustancia

precisa, quedaba sin el preciso ahora, para que todo lo dicho fuera motivo de escándalo u ofensa.

Dicho en pocas palabras: lo que había ocurrido era que Charlotte y el Príncipe, por el solo giro de la muñeca del destino —«llevados», sin duda alguna, por pasos y por etapas que la observación consciente no había percibido—, habían quedado situados frente a frente en una libertad que participaba de una manera extraordinaria de la perfección ideal, por cuanto el mágico tejido se había formado, sin esfuerzos por su parte, casi sin el leve toque de su voluntad siquiera. Sobre todo en la presente ocasión, sonaba una vez más en el ámbito de su seguridad, como un eco lejano, aquella misma voz que el Príncipe había oído en vísperas de su matrimonio con una inquietud de muy diferente naturaleza. Vagamente, una y otra vez, él había tenido la impresión, a partir de aquel período, de oír la voz diciéndole la razón por la que sonaba tan reiteradamente, pero ahora la voz sonaba juntamente con una música de amplia sonoridad que llenaba la estancia. La razón —en cuya compañía el Príncipe había vivido con harta intimidad durante un cuarto de hora— radicaba en que la realidad de la seguridad de los dos ofrecía ahora una especie de receptáculo sin precedentes, que se ensanchaba y se ensanchaba, aun cuando envolvía elásticamente aquella seguridad, la guardaba suavemente, como protegiéndola con montones de suave pluma. Aquella mañana en el parque, la duda y el peligro no habían fallado, aunque disimulando su presencia, en tanto que esta tarde la historia se reanudaba con una confianza claramente percibida. Para general tranquilidad de los dos, Charlotte era quien había acudido a fin de dar mayor claridad a aquella confianza. A pesar de que no fue ésta la tarea con la que Charlotte inició la entrevista, la confianza se formó avasalladoramente por sí misma. Se hallaba en el significado de la pregunta que había formulado al Príncipe en el instante en que quedaron solos, a pesar de que éste, como si no la hubiera comprendido, no le dio directa contestación; se hallaba en el significado de todo lo demás, hasta en la consciente rareza del negro sombrerito de Charlotte y la consciente humildad de su vestido. Estas excentricidades le ayudaron un poco a dejar sin respuesta la primera pregunta permitiéndole preguntarle qué le había ocurrido a su coche y por qué no lo utilizaba, haciendo el tiempo que hacía, a lo que ella repuso:

—Pues precisamente por eso, por el tiempo. Es una manía. Al no utilizarlo me siento igual que antes, igual que en aquellos tiempos en que podía hacer lo que quería.

Capítulo XVIII

Charlotte pronunció estas palabras de manera tan rotunda que el Príncipe percibió al instante la verdad que expresaban; a pesar de ello, se trataba de una verdad que no dejaba de intrigarle:

—¿Realmente hubo un tiempo en que te gustaba ir de un lado para otro con semejante tiempo?

Quieta allí, junto al fuego, Charlotte repuso:

—Ahora tengo la impresión de que en aquellos tiempos todo me gustaba. De todas maneras, me produce el goce de volver a experimentar los viejos sentimientos. Vuelven, sí, vuelven.

Charlotte hizo una pausa. Y prosiguió:

—Todo vuelve, y no hace falta que te lo diga porque también te consta.

El Príncipe estaba de pie cerca de Charlotte, con las manos en los bolsillos, pero sin mirarla, fija la vista en la mesa de té. Riendo, replicó:

—Bueno, la verdad es que no soy tan valiente como tú. Además, tengo la impresión de que realmente me gusta utilizar carruajes.

Rápidamente, añadió:

—Pero dejemos eso, me parece que necesitas urgentemente un poco de té. Permite que te prepare una taza.

El Príncipe se ocupó de esta tarea, no sin que antes Charlotte se sentara en un silloncito bajo que el Príncipe había empujado hasta el lugar en que la muchacha se hallaba de pie. Mientras Charlotte hablaba, el Príncipe le fue sirviendo lo que le pedía. Iba de la mesa al lugar en que estaba Charlotte y viceversa. Luego, se sirvió él mismo una taza de té. Con el paso del tiempo la visita de Charlotte adquirió más y más la naturaleza de una señal de comunicación que ella, responsable y deliberadamente, había venido a dar con referencia a la clarificación de la situación en que los dos se hallaban. Pero, a pesar de esto, todas las manifestaciones se producían como si tuvieran lugar en una muy alta esfera de debate, en el fresco aire superior de las más sutiles distinciones, en la más profunda sinceridad, en la más amplia filosofa. Fueran cuales fueran los hechos alejados y relacionados entre sí, la cuestión consistía principalmente en que estos hechos fuesen contemplados por los dos de la misma manera, a lo cual contribuían en gran manera las presentes circunstancias. Charlotte dijo:

—No consiste en que no tengas mi valentía, sino en que no tienes mi imaginación, creo yo. A no ser que, a fin de cuentas, resulte que no tienes mi inteligencia. De todas maneras, esto no me causará miedo hasta que me des mayores pruebas de ello.

Y Charlotte volvió a hacer, aunque con más claridad, la misma afirmación que había hecho momentos antes:

—Además, sabías que hoy vendría. Si sabías esto, ya lo sabías todo.

Éstas fueron las palabras con que Charlotte prosiguió, y si el Príncipe no se dio por enterado ni siquiera entonces de la posición adoptada por Charlotte, ello quizá se debió a que le trataba de nuevo como si hubiera colocado al Príncipe aquella máscara de contemporizante amabilidad que éste se había puesto para que Charlotte no apartara de ella la vista, en aquella otra importante ocasión, y desde entonces Charlotte llevaba consigo la expresión de esa máscara como una preciosa medalla —y no bendecida por el Papa, precisamente— colgada del cuello. Tanto si era así como si no, Charlotte había venido por propia decisión,

ninguno de los dos iba a mencionar aquella gran ocasión anterior. Charlotte dijo:

—Sobre todo he venido impulsada por un personal sentimiento de romanticismo.

—¿El romanticismo de tomar el té conmigo junto al fuego? Bueno, eso es algo que incluso mi inteligencia puede comprender.

—Hay más que eso. Tienes que pensar que si mi vivir es mejor que el tuyo, se debe a que soy más valiente que tú. Te aburres, y yo no. Después de unos instantes de silencio, repitió:

—Yo, no.

El Príncipe protestó:

—Aburrirse sin un momento de alivio es precisamente lo que requiere valentía.

—Pasiva, no activa. Si te interesa saberlo, te diré que mi diversión ha consistido en pasarme todo el día en el centro de la ciudad.

Como si saltara de un asunto a otro, Charlotte preguntó:

—¿Y tú, no has salido en todo el día?

Inmóvil, con las manos en los bolsillos, el Príncipe repuso:

—¿Y para qué iba a salir?

—Bueno… ¿Y para qué las personas que se encuentran en nuestro caso han de hacer algo, sea lo que sea? Eres maravilloso, eres completamente maravilloso, sabes vivir. Nosotros, todos los restantes seres humanos, no somos más que torpes brutos, comparados contigo. Siempre tenemos que estar haciendo una cosa u otra. Sin embargo, si hubieras salido de casa, quizá habrías perdido la ocasión de verme, lo cual, y tengo de ello la plena seguridad, aunque tú no lo confieses, era precisamente lo que no querías que ocurriera, y te habrías perdido, sobre todo, la satisfacción de que haya venido a felicitarte por tu vivir, aunque finjas indiferencia. Esto es, en realidad, lo que al fin puedo hacer. Tú no puedes saber siquiera a estas alturas, no, no puedes saberlo, cuál es el lugar en que te encuentras.

Guardó silencio en espera de que el Príncipe le dijera que sí que lo sabía o fingiera no saberlo. Pero él se limitó a inhalar aire larga y profundamente, de manera que la inhalación pareció un respingo de impaciencia. Con ello, el Príncipe alejó de sí el problema de determinar si sabía o no sabía el lugar en que se encontraba, con lo cual pareció dejar el terreno despejado para que la pregunta quedara centrada en su visitante, en Charlotte Verver, sentada allí ante el fuego. En consecuencia, mirándose los dos largamente durante un rato, causaron la impresión de tratar el problema en silencio, pero lo que consiguieron con ello al final del silencio fue haber ampliado el problema de forma absolutamente desproporcionada. Esto quedó de relieve en las palabras que Charlotte dijo a continuación:

—Es todo tan extraordinario que no se puede expresar con palabras. Creo sinceramente que la relación entre nosotros dos es de tan extraña naturaleza que jamás hubo en el mundo dos personas con buenas intenciones que se vieran semejantemente ligadas. En consecuencia, ¿no crees que debiéramos aceptar la realidad tal como se nos ofrece?

Charlotte había formulado esta pregunta de un modo todavía más directo que la anterior, pero el Príncipe tampoco dio inmediata respuesta a esta segunda pregunta. Fijándose solamente en que ella había terminado de tomar el té, se hizo cargo de la taza de la muchacha, la devolvió a la mesa, y preguntó a Charlotte si quería algo más; ésta repuso:

—Nada más, gracias.

Entonces, el Príncipe regresó junto al fuego y devolvió a su debido lugar un leño desplazado, lo cual hizo mediante una leve patada que resultó casi excesivamente eficaz. Charlotte se había puesto de nuevo de pie, y repitió entonces las palabras que tan francamente había dicho al principio:

—¿Qué más, querido, qué otra cosa podemos hacer en este mundo?

Sin embargo, el Príncipe no prestó a las palabras de Charlotte en esta ocasión más atención que en la primera. Llevado por simple curiosidad, preguntó:

—¿Dónde has estado?

—En todos los sitios que se me han ocurrido, salvo a ver gente. No quería ver gente, necesitaba urgentemente pensar. Pero he regresado a casa tres veces para volver a salir. El cochero seguramente imagina que estoy loca. Ha sido muy divertido. Cuando el cochero y yo pasemos cuentas le deberé más dinero del que ha visto junto en toda la vida.

Después de una pausa, siguió:

—He estado en el Museo Británico, que, como ya sabes, me entusiasma. He estado en la Galería Nacional y he visitado diez o doce librerías de viejo, en donde he encontrado tesoros, y he almorzado,

llevada por un perverso capricho, en una casa de comidas de Holborn. He tenido deseos de ir a la Torre, pero estaba demasiado lejos, o al menos así me lo ha dicho el cochero. También he tenido deseos de ir al parque zoológico, pero no lo he hecho por la lluvia. Esto también me lo ha hecho observar el cochero. Aunque no quieras creerlo, también he estado en San Pablo.

Por fin, Charlotte concluyó:

—Los días así son muy caros. Sí, porque además del gasto del coche de alquiler, he comprado qué sé yo cuántos libros.

Inmediatamente, Charlotte pasó a otro tema:

—No hago más que preguntarme cuánto tiempo hace que no los has visto.

Y, luego, de una forma que al Príncipe le pareció un tanto brusca, Charlotte aclaró:

—A Maggie y al niño, quiero decir. Sí, porque supongo que sabes que Maggie se ha llevado al niño.

—Sí, claro, lo sabía. Los he visto esta mañana.

—¿Y te han contado sus planes para hoy?

—Maggie me ha dicho que se llevaba al niño, como de costumbre, *da nonno*.

—¿Todo el día?

El Príncipe dudó, aunque lo hizo de modo que parecía que su actitud hubiera variado íntegramente.

—No me lo ha dicho, y yo no se lo he preguntado.

—Bueno, en ese caso forzosamente tuviste que verlos antes de las diez y media. Llegaron a Eaton Square antes de las once. Como sabes, Adam y yo no desayunamos en la mesa. Tomamos un té en nuestros respectivos dormitorios. Bueno, al menos eso es lo que yo hago. Luego, almorzamos temprano. Esta mañana he visto a mi marido a las once, estaba enseñando al niño un libro con ilustraciones. Maggie había estado con ellos, y luego los dejó juntos. Maggie se fue, llevándose el coche, para hacer algo que Adam tenía que hacer, pero que Maggie le ha ofrecido hacer por él.

En este punto, el Príncipe causó la impresión de sentir cierta curiosidad:

—¿Llevándose tu coche, quieres decir?

—No sé cuál. Carece de importancia.

Sonriendo, Charlotte advirtió:

—No se trata de una cuestión de coche más, coche menos. Y si te empeñas, te diré que tampoco es una cuestión de coche de alquiler o no. Me parece hermoso que no se trate de una cuestión de algo vulgar y horrendo.

Charlotte guardó silencio para dar ocasión al Príncipe de mostrarse de acuerdo, y aun cuando éste nada dijo, fue evidente que estaba totalmente de acuerdo. Charlotte añadió:

Y he salido. Necesitaba salir. Sí, tenía esta idea. Me parecía importante. Y ha sido importante, es importante. Ahora sé, cosa que antes no sabía, lo que sienten esos dos. De ninguna otra manera hubiera podido saberlo con seguridad.

El Príncipe observó:

—Se sienten confiados.

Era exactamente lo que iba a decir Charlotte, que ahora también lo dijo:

—Se sienten confiados.

Y Charlotte procedió lúcidamente a ilustrar esta afirmación refiriéndose a las tres diferentes ocasiones en que, en el curso de su alocada excursión, había regresado a la casa de Eaton Square llevada por la curiosidad e incluso por cierta ansia. Charlotte tenía llave de la puerta de entrada a la casa, que rara vez utilizaba. Esta llave la tenía en su poder porque irritaba a Adam, y ésta era una de las pocas cosas que le irritaban, encontrar todavía a los criados en pie e inhumanamente rígidos, cuando regresaban de alguna fiesta a altas horas de la noche.

—Por lo tanto, he podido entrar cada una de estas veces, dejando el coche de alquiler esperándome, y percatarme por mí misma, sin que ellos se enteraran, de que Maggie todavía estaba allí. He entrado y he salido sin que ellos ni siquiera lo sospecharan. ¿Y qué suponen que ha sido de una, cuando una se va? No me refiero al punto de vista sentimental o moral, ya que éste poco importa, sino al punto de vista físico y material, sólo en tanto que mujer que ha salido de casa, como a decente e inofensiva esposa, como la mejor madrastra que jamás haya habido en el mundo o, sencillamente, como la *matresse de la maison* que no carece totalmente de conciencia…

Hizo una pausa y concluyó:

—Incluso ellos, a su extraña manera, han de tener alguna idea al respecto.

El Príncipe dijo:

—Y tanto. Tienen una gran idea al respecto.

Nada le fue más fácil que ampararse en la cantidad. El Príncipe añadió:

—Nos tienen en un gran concepto. Especialmente a ti.

Sonriendo, Charlotte observó:

—No pongas toda la responsabilidad sobre mis espaldas.

Pero ahora el Príncipe ponía toda la responsabilidad en un lugar que Charlotte había preparado magníficamente al efecto:

—Todo radica en tu conocido carácter.

Sin dejar de sonreír, Charlotte dijo:

—Gracias por lo de «conocido».

—Todo radica en tu maravillosa inteligencia, en tu maravilloso encanto. Todo radica en los efectos que estas dos cualidades han producido en beneficio tuyo en el mundo de los dos. Para ellos tú eres todo un personaje. Y los personajes van y vienen.

Riendo en el ahora feliz ambiente que los dos habían creado, Charlotte dijo:

—No, querido, en este punto yerras del todo. Esto es, precisamente, lo que los personajes no pueden hacer, viven solemnemente y, siendo objeto de constantes consideraciones, no tienen llave de la puerta de entrada, sino que son anunciados con tambores y trompetas, y cuando salen con su humilde sombrerito, sólo consiguen con ello armar más ruido. En todo caso, *caro mio, si* aquí hay un personaje, este personaje eres tú.

Ahora fue él quien protestó:

—¡No, no, no estoy dispuesto a cargar con esta responsabilidad! De todas maneras, cuando regreses a casa, ¿dónde les dirás que has estado?

—Diré, lisa y llanamente, que he estado aquí.

—¿El día entero?

—Sí, el día entero. Acompañándote en tu soledad. ¿Cómo es posible que llegues a comprender algo, sin ver que esto precisamente es lo que por fuerza ha de gustarles que yo haga en beneficio tuyo? De la misma forma que tú, cómodamente, puedes hacer lo mismo en el mío. Lo que nosotros debemos hacer es tomarlos tales como son.

El Príncipe meditó estas palabras, a su inquieta manera, aun cuando sin apartar la mirada de Charlotte. Después de lo cual, con cierta incoherencia, aunque muy vehementemente, dijo:

—¿Y cómo puedo dejar de estimar, ante todo y sobre todo, lo mucho que quieren a mi chico?

Y después, levemente desconcertado al advertir que Charlotte nada tenía que comentar, lo cual el Príncipe percibió al instante, añadió:

—De la misma manera se hubieran portado con un hijo tuyo.

—¡Ojalá hubiera podido tenerlo! Había puesto todas mis esperanzas en ello, tenía fe en ello. Hubiera sido mucho mejor para todos. Hubiera representado probablemente una gran diferencia. También Adam, pobrecillo, pensaba en esta posibilidad. Tengo la certeza de que ansiaba tener un hijo.

Charlotte había hecho estas afirmaciones una a una, separándolas, en tono grave, triste y responsable, como si tuviera el deber de hablar con toda claridad a su amigo. Hizo una breve pausa, luego habló como si quisiera de una vez para siempre dejar claramente sentada una realidad:

—Ahora tengo la absoluta seguridad de que jamás podré tener un hijo.

El Príncipe esperó unos instantes antes de preguntar:

—¿Jamás?

—Jamás.

La manera en que los dos trataban el tema no era solemne, pero sí dotada de cierta decencia, y quizá incluso con ansias de concreción. Charlotte añadió:

—Probablemente hubiera sido mejor para todos, pero así han ocurrido las cosas.

Después de una pausa, Charlotte concluyó:

—Con lo que nos hemos quedado más solos todavía.

El Príncipe meditó estas palabras y dijo:

—Tú eres quien se ha quedado sola.

—¡No vuelvas a ponerme en el centro de la situación! Tengo la seguridad de que Maggie se hubiera entregado a ese niño difícilmente con menos devoción que al tuyo.

Charlotte explicó las razones de esta afirmación:

—Hace falta algo más que un hijo mío, hace falta algo más que diez hijos míos, en el caso de que hubiera podido tenerlos, para que nuestros *sposi* se mantengan alejados el uno del otro.

Charlotte sonrió ante la exageración que su imagen significaba, pero como el Príncipe causó la impresión, a pesar de la sonrisa de su amiga, de dar gran importancia a sus palabras, ella volvió a hablar en tono notablemente grave:

—Por raro que parezca, estamos inmensamente solos.

El Príncipe había estado moviéndose, dando pasos de aquí para allá, con aire de vaguedad, las manos en los bolsillos, pero ahora quedó quieto frente a Charlotte. Y así escuchó estas últimas palabras, que le indujeron a echar un poco la cabeza hacia atrás, como si buscara en su mente, fijando la vista en el techo. Charlotte le preguntó:

—Y tú, ¿qué dirás que has hecho hoy?

Estas palabras sirvieron para devolver al Príncipe a la realidad presente y a la visita de Charlotte, quien aclaró su pregunta:

—Quiero decir cuando Maggie vuelva, porque supongo que tarde o temprano volverá. Y me parece que más vale que tú y yo digamos lo mismo. El Príncipe volvió a pensar y dijo:

—Bueno, tampoco puedo decir que he hecho lo que no he hecho.

—¿Y qué es lo que no has hecho?

La pregunta de Charlotte quedó vibrando en el aire, hallándose los dos cara a cara; el Príncipe leyó en sus ojos la intención de sus palabras. Ahora, el Príncipe dijo:

—Si no queremos portarnos de una manera absurda, debemos, por lo menos, hacer lo mismo tú y yo. Creo sinceramente que debemos actuar de mutuo acuerdo.

—¡Efectivamente, así es!

Las cejas y los hombros de Charlotte se alzaron alegremente, expresando así el alivio que nuestra joven amiga experimentó ante el cariz que la conversación había adquirido. Dijo:

—¡Esto es lo único que quiero en el mundo! Debemos actuar de mutuo acuerdo. ¡Bien sabe Dios que esto es lo que ellos hacen!

Evidentemente el Príncipe así lo entendía, y la situación de los dos podía basarse en el reconocimiento que el Príncipe había expresado. Pero también evidentemente, al mismo tiempo, vio que aquello que se le avecinaba era excesivo para él, por lo que bruscamente retrocedió a un terreno en el que Charlotte no le esperaba:

—La dificultad consiste, y siempre consistirá, en que no comprendo a Maggie y a su padre. Al principio no los comprendía, pero pensaba que llegaría a comprenderlos. Al menos albergaba esperanzas de ello, y en aquel entonces creía que Fanny Assingham me ayudaría.

Charlotte Verver exclamó:

—¡Fanny Assingham!

El tono en que Charlotte había pronunciado estas palabras indujo al Príncipe a dirigirle una penetrante mirada. El Príncipe dijo:

—Fanny haría cualquier cosa por nosotros.

Al principio Charlotte nada dijo, como si su silencio se debiera a que tenía demasiado que decir al respecto. Luego, con benevolencia, negó con la cabeza y dijo:

—Estamos fuera del alcance de Fanny.

El Príncipe meditó, con la intención de averiguar en qué punto estas palabras los situaban. Dijo:

—Bueno, pues haría cualquier cosa por ellos.

—También nosotros; en consecuencia, Fanny carece de importancia. Fanny ha quedado fuera de liza. No nos comprende.

Y Charlotte concluyó:

—Fanny Assingham no cuenta para nada.

El Príncipe volvió a vacilar antes de decir:

—Salvo para ocuparse de ellos.

Instantáneamente, Charlotte repuso:

—¿Es que eso no es asunto exclusivamente nuestro?

Había hablado como animada por una llama de orgullo en su privilegio y en su deber; ahora añadió:

—Creo que no necesitamos la ayuda de nadie.

Charlotte había hablado con una nobleza que en modo alguno quedaba mermada por haber surgido de tan extraña fuente, con una sinceridad visible incluso a través de los complicados giros por los que todos los esfuerzos encaminados a proteger al padre y a la hija debían proceder necesariamente de ellos dos. De todas maneras, las palabras de Charlotte causaron al Príncipe la impresión de que un resorte situado en su fuero interno, un débil resorte, hubiera sido quebrado. En todo momento esas cosas, el privilegio, el deber, la oportunidad, habían constituido la sustancia de la visión del Príncipe, habían representado la nota que el Príncipe se reservaba para demostrar a Charlotte que él, en la muy especial situación en que se encontraban, no carecía del sentido de la responsabilidad. Ahora, a fin de no quedar como un perfecto insensato, necesitaba ineludiblemente esgrimir un concepto concreto que justificara sus actos, y la luminosa idea que Charlotte acababa de manifestar era precisamente la expresión de este concepto. Charlotte se le había anticipado, aunque, como sea que la expresión empleada por ella nada dejaba que desear, en cuanto a la belleza de su forma, el Príncipe antes se sintió halagado que ofendido. Una gran luz apareció en su rostro mientras contemplaba a Charlotte, una luz de excitada percepción perteneciente íntegramente al Príncipe, luz en cuya gloria —ya que casi cabía calificarlo así— lo que el Príncipe dio a Charlotte tuvo tanto valor como lo que Charlotte había dado al Príncipe:

—Son extraordinariamente felices.

Y la medida que Charlotte dio a esta felicidad fue quizá excesiva:

—Beatíficamente.

El Príncipe prosiguió:

—Esto es lo más importante, por lo que, en realidad, poco importa que no los comprenda. Además, tú los comprendes. Por lo menos, los comprendes lo suficiente.

Después de unos instantes, Charlotte advirtió:

—Quizá comprenda a mi marido, pero no comprendo a tu esposa.

—De todas maneras, tú perteneces a su raza, más o menos. En términos generales, tienes las mismas tradiciones, la misma educación y estás hecha de la misma pasta moral. Tienes cosas en común con ellos. Pero yo, después de haberme esforzado en averiguar si tenía alguna de esas cosas en común, he advertido que no, y todos mis esfuerzos han resultado vanos, uno tras otro. No creo que tengamos nada en común digno de ser tenido en cuenta. Y no me queda más remedio que concluir que soy absolutamente diferente a ellos.

Charlotte hizo una importante afirmación:

—Pero no puedes decir lo mismo con respecto a mí.

—No lo sé, a fin de cuentas, no estamos casados. El matrimonio saca las diferencias a la superficie. Quizá si estuviéramos casados, descubrirías abismos de divergencia.

Sonriendo, Charlotte dijo:

—Pues si de estar casados depende, estoy a salvo como lo estás tú. Además, como tan a menudo hemos tenido ocasión de observar, e incluso de manifestar, Adam y Maggie son muy simples.

Meditó Charlotte unos instantes y añadió:

—Es dificultoso llegar a creer este hecho, pero tan pronto como ha quedado aceptado, facilita la actuación. En lo que a mí respecta, diré que he aceptado este hecho, por lo que no tengo miedo.

El Príncipe, dubitativo, preguntó:

—¿Miedo a qué?

—Bueno, pues, en términos generales, no tengo miedo de cometer un tremendo error, principalmente un error basado en la idea de que son diferentes.

Charlotte explicó sus palabras:

—Sí, debido a que esta idea induce a comportarse con excesiva ternura.

—Es cierto.

—Además, hay otra cosa. Soy incapaz de meterme dentro de la piel de Maggie, lo siento, pero no puedo. No es de mi medida, ni siquiera podría respirar en ella. Pero al mismo tiempo, albergo la certeza de que sería capaz de hacer cualquier cosa para proteger esta piel, incluso del más leve arañazo. A pesar de la ternura que Maggie me inspira, todavía es mayor la que siento por mi marido. ¡Es de una simplicidad tan dulce…!

El Príncipe ponderó un tanto la dulzura de la simplicidad del señor Verver, y dijo:

—Bueno, me parece que no puedo elegir entre Maggie y su padre. De noche, todos los gatos son pardos. Lo único que veo es que, por muchísimas razones, tenemos el deber de ocuparnos de ellos y, dicho sea en

honor a la verdad, realmente lo hacemos. Para nosotros es un deber de conciencia ocuparnos de ellos…

Charlotte, dando la justa medida de la realidad, terminó la frase del Príncipe:

—Minuto a minuto, constantemente. Para esto debemos confiar el uno en el otro…

—Como confiamos en los santos que están en el cielo.

Pero después de decir estas palabras el Príncipe se apresuró a añadir:

—Lo cual, afortunadamente, podemos hacer.

Ante lo cual, y debido a la absoluta seguridad y compromiso que estas palabras conllevaban, las manos de cada uno de ellos buscaron instintivamente las del otro.

—Es maravilloso.

Con firmeza y gravedad, Charlotte apretaba las manos del Príncipe.

—Es maravilloso.

Durante un minuto estuvieron unidos, tan fuertemente cogidos y tan íntimamente enfrentados, como cualquier hora de su más fácil pasado los había contemplado. Al principio guardaron silencio, sólo mirándose, cogiéndose, encontrándose. Por fin, el Príncipe dijo:

—Es sagrado.

Y, en un susurro, Charlotte dijo:

—Es sagrado.

Juraron, ofrecieron y aceptaron y, en su intensidad, más y más estrechamente, se juntaron. De repente, a través de aquel prieto círculo, como por un angosto paso que lleva al mar situado más allá, todo se quebró, todo se derrumbó, todo cedió, todo se fundió, todo se mezcló. Sus labios buscaron sus labios; sus presiones, sus reacciones; sus reacciones, sus presiones, con una violencia que, con un suspiro, en el mismo instante, se transformó en el largo y profundo silencio con que apasionadamente sellaron su entrega.

Capítulo XIX

Tal como hemos visto, el Príncipe había sabido por Charlotte que ahora Fanny Assingham carecía de importancia; el propio Príncipe había concluido que el «ahora» estaba plenamente justificado, teniendo en consideración su más que justa apreciación de las diversas etapas anteriormente cubiertas; aun cuando el asentimiento del Príncipe fue tácito, su comportamiento se acordó tan perfectamente al asentimiento que, durante largos días, no hizo más que demorar la visita que había prometido efectuar a su vieja amiga en el curso de su diálogo en el Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores. Sin embargo, y a pesar de todo, el Príncipe hubiera lamentado ver totalmente extinguida aquella teoría acerca de la relación que los unía en concepto, el uno, de fiel discípulo y, la otra, de amable maestra de la que desde el principio tantos frutos sacaron los dos. Sin duda alguna, el Príncipe fue quien mayormente fomentó la relación antes dicha, porque la necesidad de conocimiento superaba en mucho las modestas pretensiones al saber de Fanny Assingham, y el Príncipe había repetido una y otra vez a la señora Assingham que sin ella jamás hubiera llegado a encontrarse en el lugar en que se encontraba, ante lo cual Fanny Assingham había intentado en vano ocultar el placer que llegar a creerlo le causaría, incluso después de que la cuestión de determinar en qué lugar se encontraba el Príncipe hubiera llegado a ser más cerrada que abierta a las interpretaciones. En realidad, en tiempos anteriores a los de la celebración de la referida recepción oficial, jamás la situación del Príncipe había estado en entredicho, pero en dicha recepción el Príncipe tuvo por vez primera la impresión, que le dejó un tanto defraudado, de que la buena señora incurría en cierta deficiencia con respecto a algo que él tenía clara conciencia que había dado siempre por supuesto en ella. El Príncipe todavía hallaba un tanto difícil intentar decir en qué consistía esa deficiencia de la señora Assingham; si bien ella se «había hundido», como Charlotte afirmaba, los detalles del colapso carecían realmente de importancia. Todos esos colapsos venían siempre a consistir en lo mismo, en la falta de valentía, la falta de amistad o, sencillamente, la falta de tacto, aunque quizá cualquiera de estas deficiencias quizá representara únicamente falta de ingenio y de inteligencia, lo cual era lo último que el Príncipe hubiera esperado en el caso de la señora Assingham; dicho de otra manera, significaría el triunfo de la estupidez. Charlotte había dicho que los dos estaban «fuera del alcance» de la señora Assingham, en tanto que el Príncipe siempre se había solazado en la creencia de que cierta capacidad para el fácil ejercicio de la imaginación, por parte de la señora Assingham, la mantendría siempre a su lado hasta el último instante. El Príncipe rehuía calificar la falta de fe de la señora Assingham, pero cuando meditaba a sus anchas sin ajenas imposiciones acerca de las personas que eran capaces de gozar realmente —o, al menos, con cierto refinamiento— de la pasión de la lealtad personal, estimaba que la actuación de la fantasía de dichas personas jamás era ni timorata ni escrupulosa. En caso necesario, la personal lealtad del Príncipe hubiera aceptado la personal aventura de la pobre mujer si la habría tenido. Y precisamente por eso, y en esta misma gradación, el Príncipe casi echaba en falta el consuelo de la actitud equivalente de Fanny Assingham. Y esto, a fin de cuentas, era lo que le ocurría con las personas a quienes su matrimonio le había vinculado. Sí, llegaba el momento en que uno se descubría a sí mismo en el trance de utilizar la imaginación principalmente para averiguar cómo se las arreglaba aquella gente para estimular tan poco la imaginación. Momentos había en que el Príncipe consideraba que no había nada merecedor, realmente merecedor, de sostener una relación personal con ellos, jamás se daba la encantadora predisposición a aceptar una confidencia profundamente manifestada.

Empleando términos vulgares, habría dicho que con aquella gente, uno jamás tenía que mentir ni intrigar; empleando términos humorísticos, el Príncipe habría dicho que, con aquella gente a diferencia de lo que ocurría en más altas esferas, uno jamás tenía que acechar, daga en mano, o preparar insidiosamente la copa. Éstos eran los servicios que, de acuerdo con las románticas tradiciones, se consagraban al afecto en la misma medida que se consagraban al odio. Pero el Príncipe siempre podía divertirse —en la medida que significaba diversión— diciéndose que aquella gente era precisamente aquello a lo que él había dado la espalda de una vez para siempre.

Entretanto, Fanny era, al parecer, frecuente visitante de la casa de Eaton Square. Por lo menos esto era lo que al Príncipe le decía su visitante, a quien no cabía calificar de infrecuente, y menos aún a la hora del té, en la casa de Portland Place; aun cuando el Príncipe y su visitante poca necesidad tenían de hablar de Fanny, después de haber acordado que la habían dejado atrás. Al escenario de estas conversaciones y supresiones la señora Assingham ni siquiera se acercaba. La más reciente apreciación de su personal utilidad, efectuada por la señora Assingham, parecía indicar que su más urgente terreno de actuación se hallaba en la casa de Eaton Square. En realidad, la señora Assingham encontraba allí a todos salvo al Príncipe, que, ahora, casi siempre se mantenía alejado de la casa en cuestión, o en todo caso, en las espaciadas ocasiones de sus visitas, jamás hallaba a la única persona de la que estaba un tanto distanciado. Todo lo anterior sería prodigioso si el Príncipe, con la ayuda de Charlotte, no se hubiera acostumbrado considerablemente a ello. En realidad hubiera sido indescriptiblemente notable el hecho de que por maravillosas causas que operaban en la superficie, por el momento nadie más, entre los que entraban en la combinación, parecía distanciado de nadie. Si bien es cierto que la señora Assingham se complacía en Maggie y sabía cómo tener acceso a ella, de la más fácil manera posible, tampoco cabe negar que Charlotte la preocupaba y, en gracia de los mismos razonamientos, sabía con toda probabilidad evitar la visión que alimentaba su desdicha. Desde luego, la desdicha también podía alimentarse al ver cuán ausente de su hogar Charlotte solía estar, aun cuando precisamente éste era el lugar en el que la mente ansiosa mejor podía estudiar el fenómeno del doméstico alejamiento de Charlotte. De todas maneras, Fanny, por sus propias razones, evitaba visitar la casa de Portland Place de manera harto notoria; a fin de cuentas, poca luz podía arrojar a la cuestión de si las apariciones de Charlotte allí eran frecuentes o no, de la misma forma que tampoco podía iluminar el problema de la presunta soledad que se estimaba (a este punto se llegó) rodeaba al cabeza de familia que allí vivía. Para cubrir todas las ambigüedades, para constituir la base de las diversas partes en que el día de la señora Verver se dividía, siempre se daba la circunstancia de que, en el punto al que todos habían llegado conjuntamente, la señora Verver era quien, con carácter definitivo y por general aclamación, se encargaba de las «relaciones sociales» de la familia, de las «relaciones sociales» literalmente hablando, de ambos hogares; de su talento para representarlos en el gran mundo y con gran estilo se habían acumulado las más vívidas pruebas. En ambos hogares, ya desde los primeros tiempos, había quedado bien sentado, con el mejor humor, que Charlotte constituía un «éxito social»; mejor dicho, constituía el «éxito social», en tanto que la Princesa, pese a ser dulce, pese a ser puntillosamente cumplidora de sus deberes, pese a ser encantadora, pese a ser realmente la personita más adorable del mundo, evidentemente no era el «éxito social», jamás llegaría a serlo; prácticamente, más valía que renunciara a ello, de manera que carecía de importancia que el motivo fuera que la Princesa estaba por encima, que estaba por debajo, que se encontraba excesivamente alejada del mundo social, que se perdía en él, que carecía de la preparación precisa o que no tenía la inclinación necesaria para ello. Baste decir que, fuese por afición, fuese por paciencia, esta actividad, considerada en general el acto de la representación en las grandes ocasiones y en el trato cotidiano, correspondía a Charlotte, quien gozaba de comprobada facilidad al efecto y, de manera no menos notoria, de una visión flexible y generosa de sus usos domésticos. A este respecto, Charlotte había llegado, lisa y llanamente, a hacer y a ser cuanto quería sin que le pidieran cuentas; en consecuencia, había asumido, sin modificaciones y con el más alto sentido práctico, la carga de una lista de visitas, que Maggie había tolerado, en un principio, abandonada a sí misma y abandonada aún más al Principino, que crecía desaforadamente.

Dicho de otra manera, Charlotte no sólo se había subido alegremente en el tiovivo de la vida social londinense, sino que se había entregado noblemente al servicio de los otros tres, en vistas a su mayor comodidad, sostenida en su esfuerzo por su «faceta frívola», dicho en palabras que quizá sean un poco duras para expresar su agradable curiosidad innata. Había motivos de aburrimiento, momentos engorrosos en su activo quehacer, lagunas sociales, malos cuartos de hora que aparecían como piezas falsas de una moneda devaluada, a todo lo cual Charlotte, en principio, quitaba importancia de tal manera que parecía que su

sensibilidad no hubiera reparado en ello. En ese aspecto, el Príncipe había reconocido los méritos de Charlotte poco después de que ésta regresara de su larga visita a América, después de su matrimonio, en donde fue, sin la menor duda, quien en todos los aspectos llevó sobre sus hombros la carga de la vida social con gracia maravillosa. Al lado de su marido, Charlotte se enfrentó alegremente con cuanto les salió al paso, y lo que les salió al paso fue, en ocasiones, de tal naturaleza que difícilmente se puede expresar con palabras: fue precisamente aquello que, estando en juego solamente sus personales intereses, había rehuido en el curso de la visita a América efectuada antes de su matrimonio. Los comentarios sobre el mundo norteamericano, la comparación de impresiones y aventuras se produjeron enseguida a modo de tema común de conversación para la señora Verver y su yerno, tan pronto como las dos parejas se reunieron. En resumen, ésta fue la razón por la que Charlotte pudo expresar tan pronto su punto de vista a su amigo, utilizando incluso expresiones que, según el Príncipe le dio a entender en aquel momento, le divertían en gran manera. Ella había preguntado:

—¿Acaso hay algo más sencillo que aceptarlo todo, cuando evidentemente forma parte del contrato?

Como sea que Charlotte jamás había ocultado al Príncipe «lo mucho» que su matrimonio le pareció desde un principio y «lo mucho» que realmente representaba ahora para ella, añadió:

—Mi matrimonio me ha dado tanto que yo no habría merecido ni ser tratada con benevolencia si hubiese demorado mi regreso de América. No incurrir en semejante demora y, por el contrario, dar todo lo que podía dar, es la causa y razón de mi decencia, mi honor y mi virtud. En consecuencia, estas últimas cosas, si es que te interesa saberlo, constituyen mi norma de vida y son, en términos absolutos, los pequeños dioses a los que rindo culto, las sagradas imágenes colgadas en la pared.

Y concluyó:

—Y, como sea que no soy idiota, verás como sé comportarme de acuerdo con todo lo dicho.

A partir de entonces el Príncipe pudo comprobar que se comportaba tal como había anunciado, cumpliendo, mes tras mes, día tras día, hora tras hora, los deberes propios de un oficio remunerado. Su perfecta y brillante eficiencia habían contribuido, sin duda alguna, constante e inmensamente, a la agradable comodidad en que su marido y su hija vivían arropados. En realidad, probablemente ella había conseguido más que esto, y les había proporcionado unas más bellas perspectivas, unas perspectivas más dulces, del posible alcance que podía llegar a tener dicha comodidad. El señor Verver y su hija la habían convertido, dicho sea burdamente, en su agente de relaciones públicas, y Charlotte había cumplido su misión con tal acierto que padre e hija, en justa consecuencia, se alejaron de dicho mundo mucho más de lo que al principio se habían propuesto. Además, por cumplir Charlotte con tal tarea, quedó exenta de otras de menor importancia y más humildes que, lógicamente, pasaron a ser de la competencia de Maggie, ya que por su carácter y naturaleza armonizaban mejor con ésta. De una manera natural, y por las misma razones antes dichas, entre estas tareas de menor importancia se contaba la obligación, irrogada a la nombrada en segundo lugar, de reparar todo posible olvido de Charlotte en la casa de Eaton Square. Se trataba del trabajo hogareño, ciertamente, pero ése era el trabajo de Maggie. Teniendo en consideración al bueno de Americo, que estaba dotado de las mismas tendencias humanas de Charlotte y a quien la vida hogareña en cuestión difícilmente podía satisfacer, las tareas de Maggie serían, en cierta manera, la compensación de la sumamente encantadora función de Charlotte, desde el momento en que consiguiera que ésta lo reconociera en su justa medida.

Pues bien, el que por fin advirtiera que Charlotte le reconocía todos sus méritos fue una reflexión que, en los días de que nos ocupamos, complementó en el pecho del Príncipe aquellas otras, aquellas imágenes y barruntos nacidos en su ocio, aquellas búsquedas a tientas y aquellos hallazgos de su conciencia y de su experiencia, que hemos intentado exponer ordenadamente aquí. Dichas reflexiones acompañaban lo suficiente al Príncipe —y a este efecto debemos tener en cuenta la abundancia de recursos que nuestro joven tenía en semejante materia—, mientras examinaba hasta en sus últimos detalles el principio en cuya virtud debía evitar recurrir a Fanny en Cadogan Place y, asimismo, no cometer el error de frecuentar con una excesiva y marcada asiduidad la casa de Eaton Square. Cometer este último error equivaldría a perder la oportunidad de no aprovecharse al máximo de cualquier género de inocente teoría acerca de su manera de ser o de la manera de ser de Charlotte, dominante en dicha mansión. El que inocentes teorías pudieran dominar y realmente dominaran allí era un hecho que el Príncipe había acabado por aceptar por las abundantes pruebas con carácter definitivo e irrevocable, y era cuestión de normal y común prudencia no desperdiciar ninguna impresión, incluso las adquiridas de propina. Frecuentar la casa de Eaton Square sería, dicho sea en pocas palabras, revelar que él carecía, a diferencia de su brillante amiga y parienta, de trabajo

suficiente en el mundo. Y era precisamente por esta suficiencia por lo que el Príncipe y Charlotte conjuntamente gozaban lo que de modo tan extraño y afortunado, según los dos habían comentado, les abría todo género de posibilidades. Además, lo que daba todavía mayor solidez a la situación era que el «mundillo social», gracias a otra afortunada crueldad de la suerte de Charlotte y del Príncipe, abarcaba la casa de Portland Place, sin abarcar la de Eaton Square en una medida que se pudiera comparar a la de aquélla. Debemos añadir inmediatamente que esta última residencia, al mismo tiempo, de vez en cuando despertaba a las recepciones sociales y, desperezándose, mandaba unas cuantas docenas de invitaciones; uno de estos esporádicos vuelos sociales, ocurrido precisamente poco antes de la Pascua de Resurrección, produjo el efecto de alterar levemente la idea que nuestro joven amigo tenía de la medida de su margen de libertad. Maggie, con muy bien tino, sostenía que su padre debía ofrecer de vez en cuando una cena de verdadera altura, y el señor Verver, que seguía igual que siempre, dispuesto a hacer cuanto se esperara de él, consideraba, de acuerdo con su hija, que era su esposa quien debía organizar la cena. Charlotte, por su parte, estimaba que siempre gozaban de una libertad ideal, de lo cual constituía una prueba fehaciente el que todas aquellas personas a las que ellos temían haber prestado poca atención, hasta el punto de casi haber perdido su amistad, acudían a su casa, irradiando sonrisas, con sólo recibir una invitación casi a medias y a última hora. Americo estimaba que eran, francamente, ocasiones conmovedoras para él, que se distinguían en la gran *bousculade* de Londres por estar dotadas de una leve y serena gracia, de cierta amenidad y humanidad. Todos acudían presurosos, pero todos sucumbían a la suave influencia, y la brutalidad de la multitud, de la curiosidad sin ternura, pronto quedaba arrinconada al pie de la escalinata, juntamente con los abrigos y las capas. El agasajo ofrecido aquella noche, pocos días antes de la Pascua de Resurrección, en el que Maggie y el Príncipe estuvieron inevitablemente presentes en calidad de invitados, constituyó el cumplimiento de una obligación a la que no se hacía honor a menudo, y quizá por ello con más razón todavía tuvo aquella nota de optimismo casi digno de la Arcadia. Fue una cena con asistencia numerosa, brillante, aburrida, murmurante, de benévola apariencia y media edad, constituida en su mayor parte por matrimonios afables aunque de muy alto rango, de apellidos inmensamente prestigiosos, y de muy fácil ordenación jerárquica. Después de la cena, hubo un breve concierto, dado sin la opresión de un contingente de invitados que llegó más tarde, en cuya preparación, le constaba al Príncipe, Maggie había tenido que aliviar su ansiedad consultando con el ingenio de Charlotte, y ambas se habían alegrado grandemente, y valga la expresión, de la solvencia del señor Verver.

Los Assingham no podían faltar, y allí estuvieron, aunque al pie de la escala social, y fue la esposa del coronel, a pesar de su humilde posición, la persona con la que el Príncipe, en su fuero interno, más ocupado estuvo, si exceptuamos a Charlotte. El Príncipe tuvo su atención fija en Charlotte debido, en primer lugar, a lo extremadamente bella que estaba y a lo mucho que destacaba en una reunión de miembros tan maduros y apacibles, de manera que semejaba la antorcha de la juventud viva y activa y el ejemplo de la gracia pasiva, y debido también, en segundo lugar, a que la fiesta, en la medida en que quedaba relacionada de manera más o menos destacada con una dueña de la casa, parecía relacionarse, de modo preferente y sin malas intenciones pero paradójicamente, con Maggie. El Príncipe no pudo dejar de advertir, tan pronto como cada cual quedó acomodado en el lugar que le correspondía, que también su esposa tenía perfectamente definida su pequeña personalidad, pero se preguntaba cómo aquella personalidad se las arreglaba para quedar tan visiblemente relegada —y a él le constaba que esto iba en contra de los deseos de Maggie— en vez de estar ella también pendiente del éxito e, incluso, de la dirección y de la responsabilidad de aquella fiesta. El Príncipe sabía cuáles eran los restantes rasgos que, en cualquier ocasión, y principalmente en la casa de Eaton Square, caracterizaban la apariencia de Maggie y cuál el parecido con su padre, en ocasiones muy vívido, como la intensificada fragancia de una flor, en el delicado calor de la celebración; su parecido, como el Príncipe descubrió, comunicándoselo a Maggie en Roma, en los primeros días de entusiasmo que siguieron a su compromiso matrimonial, a una menuda y joven bailarina en reposo, de muy leves movimientos, aunque casi siempre con un suave jadeo, e incluso un poco compungida, sentada en un banco; y por fin, su aproximación, ya que antes se trataba de analogía que de identidad, a las imágenes recibidas de una notable y neutral decencia que representaba, en el largo linaje del Príncipe, la normal calidad de esposa y madre. Si la matrona romana había sido, de manera suficiente, en primero y último lugar, el honor de dicho linaje, no cabía la menor duda de que Maggie, a los cincuenta años, se habría ensanchado y habría adquirido la precisa solidez para alcanzar tal dignidad, aun cuando quizá evocando un poco la imagen de una Cordelia en miniatura. Sin embargo, en su debido momento, cierta luz se hizo en la mente del Príncipe, y tuvo una conciencia más clara que en cualquier otro momento anterior

de la vaga aunque no por ello menos exquisita participación de la señora Verver, como una insinuada o meramente ofrecida discreción de la indefinible e insondable relación de ésta con la escena ante la vista del Príncipe. La determinada condición de la señora Verver, su natural puesto y vecindad, su más intensa presencia, su más tranquila sonrisa, su menor número de joyas, nada eran en comparación con la preocupación que ardía en Maggie, como una llamita que había prendido en cada una de sus mejillas un revelador, aunque en modo alguno desagradable, rubor. Aquella fiesta era la fiesta de su padre y el menor o mayor éxito de la fiesta era una cuestión que tenía tanta importancia para ella como para su padre, por lo que esta identificación había creado en Maggie una especie de visible inquietud, bajo cuya presión rebosaba filial reverencia, aunque con pocas expresiones, en los movimientos y en el tono, de naturaleza filial. Todo era inconfundible y, cuán bello podía ser, e incluso igualmente divertido, pero todo había tenido la virtud de dejar a los dos tan unidos, tan indivisos por el matrimonio de cada uno de ellos que la Princesa, *il ny avait pas à dire*, sentárase donde se sentara, sería siempre en aquella casa Maggie Verver. En la ocasión presente, el Príncipe quedó tan dominado por esta impresión que su natural secuela hubiera sido preguntarse si el señor Verver habría producido en anteriores ocasiones una impresión semejante, en el caso de haber ofrecido la fiesta solo con su hija.

Sin embargo, si esta consideración retroactiva se hubiera producido, habría quedado inmediatamente cortada, en los presentes momentos, por cuanto Americo reparó, con claridad no igualada en momento alguno, en que su padre político era el hombre que menos apariencias tenía a su disposición para los diferentes momentos. Era un hombre sencillo, era el arquetipo de la sencillez; nada más cabía decir de él en lo que se refiere a las apariencias, si es que cabía hablar de apariencias en su caso, cuestión que, habida cuenta de la debilidad de la tesis afirmativa, resultaba harto discutible. Divertía a nuestro joven amigo, quien, como se verá, dicha noche se solazaba de muy diversas maneras ocultas; le divertía, decíamos, darse cuenta de que todos los demás elementos de que el dueño de la casa estaba formado, tales como recursos, posesiones, servicios y generosidades aumentadas por leyendas sociales no dependían de una personal «ecuación» ni de un medio conmensurable, si es que queremos expresar el efecto de cantidad. Para aquella buena gente, la cantidad se hallaba en el aire en torno de ella, y la estimable calidad del señor Verver se hallaba así mismo, casi íntegramente, en este elemento. Era un hombre flaco y modesto, de frente despejada, y sus ojos, si bien miraban sin miedo, carecían de expresión de reto. No tenía los hombros anchos, su pecho no era abombado, ni su piel lozana, no cubría su cabeza y, a pesar de todo lo dicho, causaba la impresión, sentado allí, en el lugar que en la mesa correspondía al anfitrión, de un muchacho que tímidamente agasaja, por cierto rango que le ha sido impuesto, de modo que parecía que pudiera ser un poder entre diversos poderes, el representante de cierta fuerza o potencia, al igual que un rey niño es el representante de una dinastía. En esta visión generalizada, esta noche más intensa, pero siempre activa de su suegro, se había refugiado ahora Americo. El refugio, después de la reunión de los dos matrimonios en Inglaterra, se había convertido en un sustitutivo de la comunidad, de hombre a hombre, que según los originarios cálculos de Americo bien hubiera sido posible, pero en realidad no había madurado ni florecido. Americo había cruzado su mirada con la de la decente pareja formada por padre e hija, primero en la mesa y luego en la sala de música, pero en aquellos ojos sólo leyó lo que había aprendido a leer durante los primeros meses de su matrimonio, durante aquel período de excesiva y ansiosa iniciación, o sea una especie de aprehensión sujeta a unas condiciones y términos fijos ya absolutos. Esta mirada directa reposaba tranquilamente, pero no se fijaba ni penetraba, y al Príncipe se le antojaba que era una mirada muy parecida a aquella que se dirige, con la debida atención, a la cifra de un cheque recibido en el curso de unas actividades comerciales, y que será ingresado, acto seguido, en la cuenta bancaria. La mirada se cercioraba de la cantidad, y de la misma manera aquella mirada se cercioraba de vez en cuando del valor que representaba el Príncipe. Así, en momentos más o menos reiterados y a plazos sucesivos, éste era remunerado perpetuamente. En cuanto al valor, él ya reposaba en el banco, aunque de forma cómodamente reiterada, constantemente garantizado y avalado. El resultado final consistía en que nuestro joven amigo no tenía el menor deseo de verse devaluado. A fin de cuentas, no había sido él quien había fijado el precio, ya que la idea de «cantidad» era del señor Verver. Ciertamente, todo debía mantenerse a la altura que correspondía a la cantidad señalada, cosa que el Príncipe jamás había percibido tan claramente como esta noche. Se habría sentido muy incómodo en el momento en que aquellas serenas miradas se posaban en él, si no se hubiera hallado en una situación tan firmemente asegurada por la fuerza de su acuerdo con Charlotte. Habría sido imposible que, de vez en cuando, su mirada no se cruzara con la de Charlotte. Era asimismo patente que Charlotte intercambiaba de vez en cuando miradas con su marido. El Príncipe percibía con

todos sus sentidos que Charlotte recibía la misma clase de miradas que él. Estas miradas juntaban a Charlotte y al Príncipe, y les mantenían unidos, a pesar de las vanas apariencias de separación, y convertían a los otros rostros, al resto íntegro de la velada, a la gente, a las luces, a las flores, a las artificiales conversaciones, a la música exquisita, en un místico puente dorado entre los dos, un puente que se balanceaba con fuerza y que, a veces, producía vértigo, puente conducente a aquella intimidad cuya ley soberana sería la de atender al «cuidado», sería la de jamás olvidar temerariamente, la de jamás herir conscientemente.

Capítulo XX

Sin embargo, para nosotros, lo más interesante en el curso de estas horas es la manera en que el Príncipe siguió experimentando otras sensaciones, y hasta poco después de la terminación de la velada en la casa de Eaton Square, cierto persistente regusto. Se trataba del tenaz sabor de una copa que le ofreció Fanny Assingham después de la cena, mientras el muy unido cuarteto mantenía a los demás invitados ordenadamente sentados en la sala de música, conmovidos, si se quiere, pero convenientemente quietos. La señora Assingham se las arregló, después de un par de interpretaciones, para manifestar a su amigo que estaba conmovida —por el genio de Brahms— hasta el punto de no poder aguantar más, por lo que, sin dar la impresión de que ello fuera deliberado, se alejó, como flotando en el aire, al lado de su joven amigo, hasta recorrer una distancia que les permitía conversar sin que pareciera un acto de desdén. Y fueron los veinte minutos en que el Príncipe gozó de la compañía de Fanny Assingham, durante el resto del concierto, bajo el dispar esplendor de la luz eléctrica, en una de las salas desiertas, y fue su conversación tan lograda y, como el Príncipe habría dicho, con tanto éxito en uno de los sofás, lo que esencialmente constituyó la base de la conciencia que el Príncipe tuvo de la ocasión que se avecinaba. Dicha ocasión, entonces mero tema de conversación, representaba la causa de que Fanny deseara intercambiar —en un tono leve, bajo el cual el fino oído del Príncipe percibió cierto nerviosismo— esas palabras a solas con él. Tan pronto estuvieron sentados juntos, Fanny abordó, encubierta pero perceptiblemente, el gran problema que dicha ocasión podría entrañar. El Príncipe se dio cuenta enseguida y de una forma tan brusca que casi requería ser explicada o justificada. Pero la brusquedad en sí constituyó su propia explicación y, a su vez, dio lugar a una situación un tanto embarazosa.

—Sabe usted que, a fin de cuentas, no van a Matcham; por lo tanto, si no van o, por lo menos, si Maggie no va, supongo que usted no irá solo.

Tal como decía, lo ocurrido allí había situado de pronto al Príncipe en Matcham, y era precisamente Matcham, durante los días de Pascua, el lugar en que, por raro que parezca, más convenía al Príncipe vivir aquellos días por el especial significado que ello comportaba, tema que había determinado en gran medida la conversación con Fanny Assingham. Digamos ante todo que el Príncipe había sido invitado a muchas mansiones rurales inglesas, que se había acostumbrado largo tiempo atrás a la vida inglesa y a actuar a la inglesa en la debida forma, y si bien no siempre gozaba con ello demasiado, sí gozaba por lo menos, y a juzgar por las apariencias, tanto como la buena gente que en la noche de los tiempos unánimemente se inventó aquella forma de vivir que todavía en el prolongado crepúsculo de su buena fe, unánimemente y un tanto automáticamente, seguía practicando; sin embargo, y a pesar de todo, el Príncipe se había limitado en el curso de las referidas estancias a poner en práctica el truco de vivir de cierta manera un tanto ajena a todo, con cierta vida interior divertidamente crítica, con la necesidad, pese a participar en todo, de replegarse sobre sí mismo, de retroceder sigilosamente, alejándose otra vez y reuniéndose en la lejanía —valga la expresión— con aquella parte de su mente que no se encontraba en forma. Su cuerpo, con gran constancia, sí se hallaba en forma en las cacerías, montando a caballo, jugando al golf, caminando por las hermosas sendas diagonales que cruzaban los prados, doblando las esquinas de las mesas de billar; y en realidad, su cuerpo afrontaba en la medida suficiente los embates de las partidas de bridge, de los desayunos y los almuerzos, de los tés, de las cenas y de la nocturna culminación con el acompañamiento de

la *bottigliera*, como decía el Príncipe, erizando la bandeja y, por fin, satisfacía, en el moderado control que a los labios, al gesto y al ingenio se pedía, casi todas las normales exigencias de conversación. En consecuencia, se daba cuenta de que, en semejantes ocasiones, cierta parte de su persona se hallaba ausente, porque era precisamente cuando se encontraba solo o cuando se encontraba con sus familiares —o cuando se encontraba a solas con la señora Verver—, cuando hablaba, escuchaba y sentía como un ser mucho más íntegro, más congruente.

En consecuencia, la «sociedad inglesa», como hubiera dicho el propio Príncipe, le dejaba partido en dos y al considerarse a sí mismo en relación con ella, a menudo se comparaba con un hombre poseedor de una brillante estrella, de una condecoración, de la distinción de ser miembro de tal o cual orden, de algo tan ornamental que, desde un punto de vista teórico, sin ello su identidad no era completa, pero que, al advertir que dicha distinción no era habitualmente compartida por el resto de los humanos, no le quedaba otro remedio que estar casi constantemente quitándose del pecho el objeto en cuestión y guardándoselo en el bolsillo, no sin cierta renuencia. La brillante estrella del Príncipe quizá no fuera otra cosa de más valor que su propia sutileza personal, pero fuera lo que fuese dicho objeto, ahora el Príncipe no hacía más que llevar las manos a él para ocultarlo, lo cual le representaba principalmente un inquieto juego de la memoria y un hermoso bordado del pensamiento. En la casa de Eaton Square, durante los minutos de conversación de que el Príncipe gozó con su vieja amiga ocurrió algo de cierta notable importancia. En la perspectiva que el Príncipe tenía actualmente ante sus ojos, advirtió con claridad meridiana que la señora Assingham le había ofrecido su primera pequeña mentira. Esto adquirió destacada importancia sin que él hubiera podido decir por qué. La señora Assingham jamás le había mentido antes, aunque quizá se debiera a que nunca se había visto obligada a hacerlo por razones intelectivas o morales. Tan pronto la señora Assingham le había planteado la cuestión de lo que el Príncipe debía o no debía hacer —con lo cual también se refería a lo que debía o no debía hacer Charlotte—, en el caso de que Maggie y el señor Verver no aceptaran la invitación que durante uno o dos días habían causado la impresión de aceptar resignadamente, tan pronto la señora Assingham hubo manifestado su curiosidad en lo tocante a la conducta que la otra pareja, dejada en libertad de actuación, iba a seguir, dio vivas muestras de no causar la impresión de querer investigar de un modo excesivamente directo el vivir ajeno. Estas muestras radicaron en la solicitud que tres semanas antes ya había dado al Príncipe evidentes síntomas, lo que la había obligado, después de una breve meditación, a aducir una razón comprensible por su interés, en tanto que él, por su parte, pudo vislumbrar, no sin sentir cierta lástima, los esfuerzos de la pobre señora para hallar, buscándola a ciegas, dicha razón, sin encontrarla. No sin cierta lástima, se inventó una razón para que la señora Assingham la esgrimiera, ofreciéndola con una mirada que no tenía más importancia que la que hubiera tenido el hecho de coger del suelo una flor caída de las manos de la señora Assingham y devolvérsela:

—¿Me pregunta si quizá también yo dejaré de ir porque ello puede influir en la decisión que usted y el coronel tomen al respecto?

El Príncipe, mediante estas palabras, había llegado al punto de casi invitar a la señora Assingham a que diera respuesta afirmativa a su pregunta, a pesar de que él tenía la impresión, a juzgar por las noticias que Charlotte le había dado, de que no se había pensado en los Assingham a la hora de formar el numeroso grupo de invitados a Matcham. Después de esto, lo maravilloso fue que aquel activo matrimonio consiguió quedar inscrito en la dorada lista, esfuerzo de una naturaleza tal que el Príncipe, dicho sea en honor de Fanny, jamás había visto realizar a ésta. Este párrafo del capítulo en cuestión demostraba, a fin de cuentas, los éxitos que Fanny habría podido alcanzar si se lo hubiera propuesto.

El Príncipe, tan pronto comenzó a actuar de la manera que le aconsejaban los términos en que se desarrollaban las relaciones entre las casas de Portland Place y de Eaton Square, tan pronto comenzó a gozar de la espléndida hospitalidad de Matcham, descubrió que todo, de acuerdo con su interpretación y en beneficio de su comodidad, se desarrollaba a la perfección, y más aún si tenemos en cuenta que la señora Verver se hallaba presente y a su disposición, a fin de intercambiar ideas e impresiones. La gran mansión rebosaba de invitados, rebosaba posibilidades de nuevas combinaciones, del rápido juego de posibles estrechamientos de lazos y, naturalmente, no había nada que valiera más la pena cultivar que el que el Príncipe aprovechara aquella oportunidad para conversar con su amiga, encontrándose los dos seguros y alejados de sus respectivos *sposi*. Se daba cierta feliz audacia en el hecho de que los dos se mezclaran, cada uno sin compañía, en el mismo grupo; había en ello un matiz excéntrico de amistosa libertad que hallaba tan fácil asiento en la imaginación de los cónyuges que se habían quedado en casa. Los dos corrían el evidente riesgo de que se considerara divertido el que fueran juntos de semejante manera, aunque, por otra

parte, tal consideración quedaba atenuada por el hecho de que, en la alta condición de Charlotte y del Príncipe y, asimismo, las laxas tradiciones que eran casi invitaciones a las libertades imperantes en aquella casa, no había comportamiento individual alguno, por muy marcadamente libre que fuera, que mereciera una calificación superior a la de divertido. Nuestros dos amigos se percataron de ello, como antes se habían percatado de las ventajas que ofrecía una sociedad tal que sólo tenía en cuenta su propia sensibilidad, dirigiendo la vista, como en realidad hacía, por encima del hombro a todos los que pertenecieran a inferior clase y que, además, esgrimía esta sensibilidad como si se tratara del más fácil, más amistoso y menos formalista elemento participante en la general alianza. Lo que cualquiera «pensara» de cualquier otro —y sobre todo de cualquier otro con cualquier otro— era un asunto que motivaba una tan insólita y torpe formulación, que el hecho de juzgar, sosteniendo el espíritu de balanza, habría sido estimado como cosa propia de parientes pobres, de igual limpio linaje, pero despectivamente tratados, a pesar de ser obedientes, bien educados y dotados de tacto, aun cuando con aspecto un tanto sórdido, debido sin duda a que sus posibilidades de cambiarse de ropa eran muy limitadas, para cuya tácita y abstemia presencia, jamás puesta de relieve ni tan siquiera por un gemido de la enmohecida maquinaria de dichos parientes, bastaba disponer un dormitorio en la buhardilla y darles un plato de segunda mesa, tratamiento que era el decente y usual. En aquel ambiente ligero resultaba divertido que el Príncipe volviera a estar presente, aunque sólo en representación de la Princesa, que una vez más, y desgraciadamente, no había podido abandonar su hogar; y el que la señora Verver, de manera igualmente normal, figurara como encarnada y bellamente excusatoria disculpa de la ausencia de su marido, todo él afabilidad y humildad allí, entre sus tesoros, que según la leyenda que corría no podía soportar, por sus exigentes criterios, la irritación y la depresión que las visitas multitudinarias, incluso cuando tenían lugar en casas de gran pompa, solían producirle. Nada había que objetar a la notoria y activa armonía en el trato entre el inteligente yerno y la encantadora madrastra, siempre y cuando esta relación se mantuviera en el justo punto entre lo suficiente y lo excesivo.

Teniendo en cuenta la noble belleza de la casa, con el generoso humor del soleado, borrascoso y sensual abril inglés, todo él jadeos y resoplidos de impaciencia, o incluso pataleando y llorando en ciertos momentos, como un Hércules de corta edad que se resiste a que le vistan, teniendo en cuenta además la osadía de la juventud y de la belleza, la insolencia de la opulencia y los apetitos, tan difundidos entre lo invitados, parecía que los pobres Assingham, en su relativamente marcada madurez y su relativamente menguado esplendor, eran los únicos que llegaban a semejar una falsa nota en el concierto; el movimiento del aire era tal que en cierta medida mareaba levemente, de modo y manera que, desde el punto de vista de la exhibición casi grotesca, la situación del Príncipe parecía una compleja broma pesada, organizada a su costa. Todas las voces en la gran mansión esplendorosa constituían una llamada al ingenio e impunidad del placer, todos los ecos eran un desafío a las dificultades, a las dudas o al peligro, todos los aspectos del cuadro generalmente considerado eran una ardiente invitación a lo inmediato con mucho más porvenir; a su vez esto representaba la otra cara del encanto. Sí, el mundo constituido de esta manera estaba gobernado por un encanto, el encanto de la sonrisa de los dioses y del favor de los altos poderes; la única aceptación hermosa, la única aceptación valerosa y, de hecho, la única aceptación inteligente era tener la fe puesta en sus garantías y el optimismo depositado en sus posibilidades. Lo que aquel mundo exigía —y a eso quedaba todo reducido— era sobre todo valentía y buen humor; el valor en su carácter de seguridad general, es decir, en su carácter de amparo, en el peor de los casos, jamás le había parecido al Príncipe tan convincente, ni siquiera en los más libres momentos de su antigua vida romana. En esa antigua vida romana, había habido ciertamente más poesía pero, ahora, al recordarla, le causaba la impresión de flotar en el aire contra simples horizontes iridiscentes; le parecía vaga, sin asiento, endeble y con grandes e imprevisibles lagunas de languidez. En el momento presente, en lo que ahora se extendía a su alrededor, el Príncipe sentía los pies asentados en terreno sólido, sentía las trompetas en el oído, y una bolsa insondable de sólidos y relucientes soberanos ingleses —cosa que tenía mucha más importancia— en la mano. En consecuencia, la valentía y el buen humor dominaban los días, aun cuando, dicho entre nosotros, quizá sea más oportuno advertir que, en el caso de Americo, el más profundo efecto de aquella evidente libertad quizá fuera una extraña irritación. Americo comparaba los resultados de su lúcida percepción con el extraordinario sustituto de la percepción que informaba a su esposa, en el fuero interno de aquella su tan satisfecha consideración de la conducta y rumbo del Príncipe, de aquel estado de ánimo que era, en realidad, un sucedáneo de la tranquilidad de conciencia cultivado ingeniosamente en beneficio de su esposo, que asimismo era una perversa presión inocentemente cultivada con insistencia. Y esa maravillosa paradoja llegaba a ser algunas veces tan intensa que el Príncipe prefería dejarla íntegramente oculta en su

interior. Esto no quiere decir que en Matcham se permitiera que ocurrieran hechos notables, hechos monstruosos, hechos que por sí mismos llamaran la atención, ya que sólo se daban momentos de vez en cuando en que el ambiente del día se le hacía claramente patente al Príncipe, de modo que riendo se decía: «¿Qué pensarían si lo vieran?». Se refería, naturalmente, a Maggie y a su padre, melancólicamente pensativos, en la medida en que se permitían estarlo, en la monótona casa de Eaton Square; pero, al mismo tiempo, en la creencia de que sabían a la perfección cuál era la clase de vida que sus experimentados cónyuges llevaban. A la luz de lo que hemos dicho, bien podemos concluir que Maggie y su padre nada sabían digno de consideración, absolutamente nada, ni de buena fe, ni cínicamente. Y quizá llegaran a ser un poco menos pesados si reconocieran de una vez para siempre, con paz y tranquilidad, que el conocimiento no era una de sus necesidades y que, en realidad, eran constitucionalmente incapaces de él. Aquel par de benditos eran como niños buenos, hijos de niños buenos, de manera que el Principino, por no pertenecer íntegramente a aquel linaje, bien podía adquirir en la imaginación el carácter del más maduro talento del terceto.

La dificultad radicaba, en lo que hacía referencia al efecto que en los nervios producía el trato cotidiano sobre todo con Maggie, en que su imaginación jamás quedaba alterada por la percepción de una anomalía. En realidad, la gran anomalía hubiera sido para Maggie que su marido e incluso la esposa de su padre resultaran, a la larga, haber sido cortados por el mismo patrón como lo habían sido los Verver desde largo tiempo atrás. Si uno estaba cortado por dicho patrón, nada tenía que hacer en Matcham, según las particulares condiciones —condiciones de conformidad con los principios rectores de Eaton Square— a las que de manera tan absurda uno se había doblegado. En el fondo de esa reiterada inquietud que experimentaba nuestro joven amigo, que hemos de contentarnos con denominar irritación, decíamos que de esa falsedad de su posición brillaba la roja chispa de su inextinguible idea de un modo de vivir más alto y más valeroso. Había situaciones ridículas, pero que uno no podía evitar, como, por ejemplo, cuando la esposa de uno decidía, de la forma más normal y sencilla, ponerle al otro en una situación ridícula. Sin embargo, precisamente aquí se daba la diferencia, por lo que Maggie había tenido que inventarse un método extremadamente insólito, aunque a pesar de todo se trataba de un método al que el Príncipe no podía doblegarse sin incurrir en una actitud absurda. El que a uno le empujaran sistemáticamente a tratar con otra mujer, mujer que le gustaba a uno en gran manera, y que le empujaran a ello de forma que la teoría de la relación parecía proclamar que uno era idiota o que estaba incapacitado constituía una situación en la que la propia dignidad dependía del tratamiento que uno diera a tal situación. En realidad, lo que resultaba grotesco en grado sumo era la esencial oposición de las teorías, por lo que parecía que un *galantuomo* —en el sentido en que el Príncipe constitucionalmente entendía la calidad de *galantuomo*— no pudiera hacer otra cosa que ruborizarse por ir a menudo en compañía de una persona como la señora Verver, en un estado de inocencia infantil, en el estado en que se encontraban nuestros primeros padres antes de la caída. Esta grotesca teoría, como él la hubiera llamado, quizá era tan extraña que no podía ser violentamente rechazada, y el Príncipe, como hombre de mundo, hacía piadosa justicia a la teoría en cuestión, pero a pesar de esto, y sin la menor duda, había una manera de manifestar, tanto él como su compañera, la conmiseración que la teoría les inspiraba. Los pertinentes comentarios sólo podían tener carácter privado, aunque también podían ser, por lo menos, vivaces; tanto Charlotte como el Príncipe eran afortunadamente capaces de hacer otros matizados comentarios. ¿Y acaso ese acuerdo entre los dos no era, literalmente, la única manera de no ser desconsiderados? Realmente, parecía que la medida necesaria para la protección del peligro viniera dada por la formación, entre los dos, durante su propicia visita a Matcham, de una exquisita sensación de complicidad.

Capítulo XXI

En consecuencia, el Príncipe se halló en el trance de decir alegremente y nada menos que a Fanny Assingham, con ocasión de contemplar los dos muy preocupados la situación que se daba en la casa de Eaton Square, situación que jamás hubiera podido darse en la casa de Portland Place:

—¿Qué les hubiera parecido a nuestros *cari sposi* lo que pasa aquí? Realmente, ¿qué les hubiera parecido?

Y estas confidenciales palabras hubieran sido temerarias si el Príncipe no estuviera ya, incluso para sí mismo, sorprendentemente acostumbrado a pensar que su amiga era persona en la que el elemento de protesta había quedado, en los últimos tiempos, inconfundiblemente acallado. Desde luego, el Príncipe se expuso a que la señora Assingham replicara: «Si tan mala opinión les hubiera merecido, ¿cómo es posible que tan buena le merezca a usted?». Pero estas palabras hubieran tenido, en el mejor de los casos, muy poca lógica y, por otra parte, la señora Assingham parecía dispuesta a comportarse de acuerdo con la confianza y la alegría del Príncipe. Éste también tenía su propia opinión —por lo menos opinión parcial— acerca de la fuente interior de la relativa humildad actual de la señora Assingham, que estaba en consonancia con el retraimiento en que él la había visto incurrir después de la última cena ofrecida por el señor Verver. Sin emplear diplomáticas argucias, sin hacer el menor esfuerzo para dominarla, ni sobornarla para que adoptara una actitud que de ninguna utilidad le sería, si tal actitud careciera de sinceridad, el Príncipe se daba cuenta de que podía contener e impulsar a la señora Assingham por el medio de apiadarse felizmente, y de modo instintivo, de su apenas perceptible depresión. Gracias solamente a lo que intuía que ella sentía, a lo que el Príncipe percibía que ocurría bajo las aguas cristalinas y en aquel complejo cuadro, la amistad del Príncipe compensaba encantadoramente, hora tras hora, las penalidades, dicho sea en burdas palabras, consecuentes al error cometido por la señora Assingham. A fin de cuentas, su error sólo había consistido en pretender causar al Príncipe la impresión de ser una mujer recta. Se había prestado a ser —como ella misma se había apresurado a proclamarse, en el curso de la primera media hora de conversación, durante el té— la única vieja gruñona del grupo. La escala de todo era allí muy diferente a todos los valores menores de la señora Assingham, a sus raras gracias, a su pequeña autoridad local, a su humor y a su repertorio de vestidos, con todo lo cual le bastaba en cualquier otro lugar, entre sus *bons amis*, amigos que eran suyos, de la bondadosa Fanny Assingham; todos estos valores, decíamos, y otros, ahora se habían convertido en nada. Cinco minutos habían bastado para que se produjera la fatal caída de Fanny Assingham. En Cadogan Place, Fanny Assingham siempre podía ser, en el peor de los casos, pintoresca: siempre hablaba de sí misma calificándose de mujer de Sloane Street, en tanto que en Matcham sólo podía ser horrenda. Para ella, el desastre total habría podido nacer de su verdaderamente refinado sentido de la amistad. Para demostrar al Príncipe que en realidad no le estaba vigilando —los motivos para vigilarle habrían sido terriblemente graves—, le había seguido a Matcham en busca del placer, y precisamente por esto podía hacer hincapié en su indiferencia. El Príncipe se dio cuenta de cuán noble era su comportamiento al tomarse semejante molestia, por lo que ningún hombre bueno podía permitirse hacer a Fanny Assingham el más leve matiz de censura. En consecuencia, cuando ella le dijo que le constaba que era una vieja gruñona y que incluso la doncella, cuando la atendía odiosamente, le echaba en cara, día y noche, lo muy vieja y gruñona que era, diciéndolo con descaro en la mirada y en las palabras, el Príncipe no le dijo: «¿Ve lo que ha conseguido?

¿No se da cuenta de que la culpa es suya y sólo suya?». No, el Príncipe se comportó de manera totalmente distinta, porque, siendo hombre eminentemente distinguido —la propia Fanny Assingham le había dicho que jamás le había visto tan universalmente distinguido—, distinguía ahora a Fanny, la distinguía en su oscuridad o, lo que era todavía peor, en su carácter objetivamente absurdo, y la investía del valor absoluto de que estaba dotada, la rodeaba de toda la importancia del ingenio que le era propio. El que el ingenio, en contraposición a la estatura y a la calidad de la piel, a la habilidad en el juego del bridge, y al prestigio de las perlas, pudiera tener importancia, aunque sólo de manera muy vaga, se percibía en Matcham. En consecuencia, la amabilidad del Príncipe para con Fanny —ésta calificaba de amable su comportamiento y, a pesar de sólo calificarlo así, poco faltaba para que a Fanny se le saltaran las lágrimas— tenía la grandeza de una diferencia no sólo general, sino también especial.

A modo de comentario de todo lo anterior, el Príncipe dijo a la señora Verver:

—Fanny comprende todo lo que necesita comprender. Le ha costado bastante tiempo, pero al fin lo ha conseguido. Comprende que todo lo que nosotros deseamos es darles la vida que prefieren, rodearles de paz y de tranquilidad, y, sobre todo, de esa seguridad que lleva a la paz y a la tranquilidad. Desde luego, Fanny no puede decirnos que no nos queda más remedio, por lo que a ella se refiere, que sacar el mejor partido posible de las circunstancias en que nos encontramos. No puede decir, lisa y llanamente: «No penséis en mí, también yo debo sacar el mejor partido de mis circunstancias, arregláoslas como podáis, y vivid como debéis». No, esto no me lo dice, aunque yo tampoco le pido que me lo diga. Pero su tono y su comportamiento significan que confía en que nosotros atendamos a nuestro vivir con la misma atención, la misma habilidad y el mismo tierno cuidado con que ella atiende al suyo.

Después de una pausa, el Príncipe concluyó:

—En consecuencia, creo que podemos decir que Fanny, a fin de cuentas, ha adoptado la postura más correcta.

Pero Charlotte no hizo nada para sustentar la confianza del Príncipe en sus propias palabras, y no dijo lo que podían decir de Fanny. Ya pesar de que el Príncipe había adoptado de nuevo un tono de lucidez, Charlotte no se molestó en poner de relieve la importancia, o lo que fuese, de la lección del Príncipe, y en dos o tres ocasiones le dejó que sacara por sí mismo las consecuencia de sus propias palabras, y solamente en vísperas de su partida de Matcham Charlotte le dio, de una vez para siempre, una respuesta clara y directa. Habían sabido hallar un minuto para hablar a solas en la gran sala durante la media hora anterior a la cena, porque siendo como era ésta la mejor oportunidad que tenían, ya lo habían conseguido un par de veces, esperando pacientemente a que el último ocioso subiera a sus habitaciones para vestirse con la rapidez precisa y así ser ellos los primeros en aparecer, un poco más tarde, dispuestos para el ágape. Por esto el salón estaba desierto, ya que aún no había llegado el ejército de criadas con la finalidad de palmotear almohadones y volverlos a colocar en el debido orden; y había allí un lugar, junto al fuego de la chimenea, en un extremo, en donde con un poco de arte podían simular un encuentro sin premeditación. Sobre todo, porque allí y durante unos instantes robados, podían respirar tan cerca el uno del otro, que el espacio que mediaba casi era nulo y la intensidad de la unión, así como la cautela, se transformaban en un eficaz sustitutivo del contacto. Gozaban los dos de prolongados instantes que eran como visiones de dicha y, rozándose el uno al otro, creían hacerse largas caricias. En realidad, estos momentos tenían la virtud de transformar sus palabras, y principalmente las referidas a otras personas, en algo indigno de ellos, por lo que el tono de nuestra joven dama, incluso ahora, tenía cierta sequedad:

—Me parece muy bien que Fanny confíe en nosotros. Sin embargo, ¿qué otra cosa puede hacer?

—Bueno, pues lo que hace la gente cuando no deposita su confianza. Espera, espera a que alguien no le merezca confianza.

—¿Alguien? ¿Quién, por ejemplo?

—Pues, por ejemplo, yo.

—¿Te afectaría?

El Príncipe emitió un lento suspiro que expresaba sorpresa, y preguntó:

—¿A ti, no?

Charlotte repuso:

—¿Que Fanny te demostrara que…? No. Lo único que creo que llegaría a importarme sería lo que tú, por muy confiado, permitieras que Fanny adivinara.

A estas palabras, y después de una pausa, Charlotte añadió las siguientes:

—Sabes muy bien que puedes permitir que Fanny se dé cuenta de que tienes miedo.

El Príncipe replicó:

—Sólo tengo miedo de ti, un poco y en ciertos momentos. Pero no permitiré que Fanny se dé cuenta.

Sin embargo, quedó de manifiesto que tanto los límites como la vastedad de la señora Assingham carecían de verdadera importancia para Charlotte, quien expresó la idea anterior de una manera que hasta el presente no había expresado:

—¿Qué diablos puede hacer esa mujer para perjudicarnos? No puede decir ni media palabra. Está en un estado de impotencia, no puede hablar. Si hablara, ella sería la primera perjudicada.

Como sea que el Príncipe no pareció seguir con presteza la argumentación de Charlotte, ésta añadió:

—Todo recae en ella. Ella fue quien lo inició todo; sí, todo desde un principio. Ella fue quien te presentó a Maggie. Ella fue quien concertó tu matrimonio.

En este punto el Príncipe causó la impresión de meditar un momento y, tras un instante de demora, y con una sonrisa suave pero profunda, salió con lo siguiente:

—Bueno, ¿acaso no puede decirse que Fanny Assingham, en gran medida, no hizo también tu matrimonio? Ésta fue su idea, y creo yo que la adoptó a modo de compensación.

Charlotte dudó, pero repuso con harta rapidez:

—No creo que hubiera nada que compensar. Todo ocurrió como debía ocurrir, y conste que no hablo de los problemas ni de las posibles obligaciones que Fanny hubiera podido tener conmigo o contigo. Sólo hablo de la manera en que siempre y en cada momento tomó la vida de esos dos en sus manos, y de la manera en que este hecho la tiene atada actualmente. Fanny no puede decir: «Es un tanto embarazoso decíroslo, queridos, pero la verdad es que cometí un frívolo error».

El Príncipe aceptó estas palabras con serenidad, mirándola largamente y, luego, dijo:

—Máxime si tenemos en cuenta que Fanny no cometió un error, sino que estuvo siempre en lo cierto.

Luego remató sus palabras con las siguientes:

—Todo es como debe ser, y así seguirá siendo.

—Precisamente eso es lo que he dicho.

Pero él expuso su pensamiento para conseguir con ello una más profunda satisfacción, llegando incluso a una cierta lucidez:

—Nosotros somos felices y ellos son felices. ¿Qué más se puede pedir? ¿Qué más puede desear Fanny?

A estas palabras Charlotte objetó:

—Querido, no soy yo quien dice que Fanny pueda desear más. Yo sólo digo que Fanny ha quedado fijada, que debe quedarse exactamente en el lugar en que los méritos de sus propios actos la han situado. Tú eres quien parece preocupado por la posibilidad de que Fanny adopte una peligrosa alternativa, que haga cualquier cosa, ante cuya eventualidad debemos estar preparados.

Y Charlotte, mientras razonaba con tanta coherencia, esbozaba una fría y extraña sonrisa. Prosiguió:

—Estamos preparados, preparados para cualquier cosa, preparados para todo. Fanny debe aceptarnos tal como somos, tal como estamos. Está condenada a ser consecuente, está sentenciada, pobrecilla, a la pena de afable optimismo. Sin embargo, y afortunadamente para ella, ésta es su manera de ser. Nació para tranquilizar y suavizar.

La señora Verver rió con benevolencia y remató sus palabras con las siguientes:

—¡En consecuencia, se le ha deparado la mejor oportunidad de su vida! El Príncipe observó:

—¿Lo que significa que sus actuales manifestaciones quizá no sean sinceras? ¿Que quizá sólo sean una máscara hecha de dudas y temores? ¿Que su única finalidad sea la de ganar tiempo?

Al formular estas preguntas el Príncipe causó la impresión de creer que pudieran presentarse nuevas preocupaciones, cosa que impacientó levemente a Charlotte, quien dijo:

—Hablas de estos temas como si fueran asunto de nuestra competencia. Por el contrario, yo creo que nada tengo que ver con las dudas y temores de Fanny, ni con sus ideas y sentimientos, sean cuales fueren. Eso es asunto suyo y a ella atañe solucionarlo. Para mí, basta y sobra con que Fanny tema mucho más por sí misma, por lo que vea y diga, de lo que nosotros debemos temer, incluso en el caso de que fuéramos idiotas y cobardes, cosa que no somos.

El rostro de Charlotte, al decir estas palabras —mitigando la leve dureza que quizá hubiera habido en ellas—, se iluminó, se suavizó, resplandeció. Su rostro reflejó, como jamás lo había hecho, la felicidad de la suerte de los dos. Durante unos instantes su rostro tuvo la misma expresión que si realmente hubiera pronunciado cierta palabra prohibida, hasta tal punto está dotada la cara de una reacción más sutil que la lengua, capaz de revelar el sentimiento de dicha determinada por una sensación. Cabe la posibilidad de que

Charlotte advirtiera enseguida que su amigo se estremecía de antemano a causa del empleo de la palabra que ya estaba en los labios de Charlotte, porque no cabía la menor duda de que, para el Príncipe, aún había cosas que podía apreciar, formas de ventura que podía amar, sin que le gustara en la debida proporción el nombre que tuvieran. Sin embargo, en el caso de que Charlotte hubiera tenido plena conciencia de lo anterior, ¿qué otro vocablo habría podido aplicar a la más fuerte y sencilla de sus ideas, salvo el que le cuadraba exactamente? Por esto lo empleó, aunque al mismo tiempo su instinto le indujo a rendir tributo al buen gusto del que hasta el presente no se habían apartado ni un ápice.

—Si la palabra no fuera tan vulgar, diría que estamos total e irremediablemente seguros. Perdona que emplee este término, pero es el que refleja la realidad. Estamos seguros porque ellos lo están. Y ellos lo están porque no pueden dejar de estarlo, ya que, habiendo intervenido Fanny en su beneficio al principio, ahora sería incapaz de tolerarse a sí misma si no siguiera haciendo lo preciso para que sigan estándolo.

Sonriendo, Charlotte terminó:

—Ésta es la razón por la que Fanny está inevitablemente de nuestra parte. Esencialmente, formamos una unidad con ella.

El Príncipe permitió francamente que las palabras de Charlotte le convencieran en todos sus aspectos:

—Sí, lo comprendo. Esencialmente formamos un todo con ella.

Charlotte se encogió de hombros en grácil movimiento:

—*Cosa volete*?

El efecto de lo anterior, de una manera bella y noble, fue más que romano.

Charlotte añadió:

—Sin duda alguna, somos un caso.

Mirándola, el Príncipe dijo:

—Sí, somos un caso. Y pocos habrá habido como el nuestro.

Sonriendo, ella repuso:

—Y quizá nunca, nunca más se dé otro igual. Confieso que me gusta pensar que así sea. Nuestro caso es único.

—Somos un caso único, con casi toda probabilidad, *speriamo*.

A cuyas palabras, y como si se tratara de no expresadas reflexiones, el Príncipe añadió:

—¡Pobre Fanny!

Pero Charlotte había mirado el reloj, sintió un sobresalto e hizo un ademán de advertencia. Ahora se alejó grácilmente, camino de sus habitaciones vestirse para la cena, mientras el Príncipe contemplaba cómo recorría el trayecto hasta el pie de la escalinata. Y la contempló hasta el momento en que después de volverse para dirigirle una rápida mirada, una mirada sencilla, desapareció. Pero algo sintió cuando contemplaba a Charlotte que motivó que renovara la fuerza que le había inducido a pronunciar su última exclamación, que ahora lanzó al aire en forma de suspiro: «¡Pobre, pobre Fanny!».

Sin embargo, a la mañana del día siguiente se vería que el Príncipe, actuando de acuerdo con sus palabras y al disgregarse el grupo de invitados a Matcham para regresar a sus respectivos lugares de origen, fue capaz de enfrentarse al aspecto social de la «repatriación» con la debida serenidad. Por ciertas razones, él no podía efectuar el viaje de regreso a la ciudad en compañía de los Assingham y, por las mismas razones, tampoco podía volver a la ciudad en el curso de las últimas veinticuatro horas, salvo en las condiciones que había estado meditando, en privado e incluso cabe decir que profundamente. El resultado de estas meditaciones ya había adquirido un gran valor para él, según creía muy convencido por el tono adecuado que adoptó para declinar la propuesta de su vieja amiga, formulada en términos igualmente corteses y meditados, de que el Príncipe y Charlotte podían, sin dificultad alguna, tomar el mismo tren y ocupar el mismo compartimento que el coronel y su esposa. La participación de tal idea a la señora Verver había sido, precisamente, una faceta más de la cortesía de la señora Assingham, y nada hubiera podido revelar mejor el sentido que ésta tenía de los matices sociales como su comprensión de que el caballero de Portland Place y la dama de Eaton Square podían ahora confesar la simultaneidad de sus movimientos sin incurrir en la más leve indiscreción. En el curso de los últimos cuatro días, la señora Assingham no había efectuado propuesta directa alguna al personaje últimamente mentado, pero el Príncipe fue testigo, por pura coincidencia, de las nuevas tentativas y de los esfuerzos por parte de la señora Assingham, en el momento en que los reunidos se disponían a separarse en la última noche de su estancia en Matcham. En ese momento cumbre, se habían producido las habituales conversaciones acerca de horas y combinaciones y, en medio de ellas, la pobre Fanny abordó afablemente a la señora Verver, a quien dijo:

—Usted y el Príncipe, querida…

Y lo dijo sin pestañear. Fanny daba por supuesto que aquellos dos se irían públicamente juntos. A continuación manifestó que Bob y ella estaban dispuestos, en aras de la amistad, a tomar cualquier tren, con el fin de viajar junto al Príncipe y Charlotte.

—Realmente, en esta ocasión me he quedado con la impresión de no haberla visto apenas.

Estas palabras añadieron gracia a la franqueza con que nuestra querida Fanny abordó a Charlotte. Pero, por otra parte, éste fue precisamente el momento en que nuestro joven amigo supo emplear con sumo tacto el secreto del tono justo para hacer lo que prefería. En el curso de la velada dicha preferencia no perdió ocasión de apremiar al Príncipe con mudas insistencias y, prácticamente sin palabras, dicha preferencia quedó perceptiblemente identificada con la de Charlotte. Ésta habló en todo momento dirigiéndose a su vieja y común amiga, contestando sus preguntas, pero no por ello dejó de comunicarse con el Príncipe, con tanta claridad como si agitara un pañuelo blanco asomada a una ventana.

—Me parece terriblemente amable por su parte, querida. Hacer el viaje juntos seria delicioso. Pero no debe preocuparse por nosotros. Sigan ustedes sus planes. Americo y yo hemos decidido irnos después del almuerzo.

Americo, con el áureo sonido de estas palabras aún en el oído, volvió inmediatamente la cabeza hacia otro lado a fin de evitar tener que entrar inmediatamente en liza, y también impulsado por la emoción maravillosa de haber podido comprobar hasta qué punto la intuición puede ser certera, cuando está dotada de las alas de una pasión compartida. Charlotte había esgrimido la misma alegación que el Príncipe tenía preparada en vistas a aquella circunstancia, y lo había hecho con naturalidad, como consecuencia de la cada vez más profunda y jamás expresada necesidad que cada uno de los dos tenía del otro en lo tocante a la alegación, sin que hubiera mediado palabra alguna entre los dos. Bien sabía Dios que el Príncipe no necesitaba que Charlotte le revelara aquella verdad, porque tenía plena conciencia de sus deseos, pero la lección que recibió consistió en el directo y claro tono de justificación, que, en puridad, no estaba obligada a dar, y en la manera verdaderamente superior en que las mujeres como Charlotte se expresan y se distinguen. Había contestado lo justo a la señora Assingham, no había estropeado el efecto esgrimiendo una razón que excediera ni siquiera un ápice en lo suficiente y, sobre todo, había compuesto una imagen, objeto de la tensa aunque disimulada atención del Príncipe, que resplandecía como un espejo al sol. En aquellos momentos, a su juicio, la medida de todo se hallaba en aquella imagen, principalmente la medida del pensamiento que se había estado desarrollando hasta convertirse en una verdadera obsesión, y que había comenzado a latir con una fuerza jamás igualada, bajo la alegría de que Charlotte, gracias a una perfecta sincronía de la imaginación, sentía lo mismo. En estos momentos sintió casi un cargo de conciencia ante la percepción de una verdad más sublime a cuyo fuego también Charlotte se había calentado; ahora la verdad consistía en que la ocasión que se les había ofrecido en el curso de los últimos días difícilmente podía ofrecerles una mayor belleza, salvo si mediara cierta especie de mezquindad por parte de los dos. Aquella verdad también les había dicho, sin voz perceptible a los sentidos, que entrañaba un significado, un significado que la perfecta compenetración de los dos había absorbido, igual que los labios sedientos del caminante que ha recorrido un largo trayecto sobre la arena y vislumbra a lo lejos las agrupadas palmeras, al fin en la prometida fuente del desierto. Día tras día habían gozado de la belleza, y en los labios del espíritu había quedado cierto gusto de su persistente sabor. Sin embargo, la reacción de los dos había sido inferior a su buena fortuna. Mediante un acto valeroso y libre, la manera en que dicha reacción podía elevarse a la altura de su fortuna era el problema con el que el Príncipe, antes y ahora, había estado preocupado, y en cuya exploración, como la del verde bosque moteado por el sol —el bosque del romance —, el espíritu había llegado súbitamente a un punto en el que se divisaba unas perspectiva abierta y despejada, en cuyo punto había coincidido con el de Charlotte. A partir de ese instante quedaron los dos en aquel punto, cogidos de la mano y tan unidos que, cinco minutos más tarde, se vio en el trance de emplear exactamente el mismo tono que Charlotte había empleado para decir a la señora Assingham que también él lamentaba no poder hacer, en lo tocante al regreso a Londres, lo que bien hubiera podido hacerse.

De repente, esta actitud llegó a ser la más fácil del mundo; además, esta sensación parecía equivaler a algo maravilloso que consistía en que el Príncipe pudiera sentirse, a partir de aquel momento y para siempre jamás, y en todas las facetas, total y cómodamente a sus anchas ante Fanny Assingham. En realidad, llegó más lejos que Charlotte, ya que atribuyó a ésta la causa de su impedimento. Charlotte, para complacer a la dueña de la casa, se quedaría a almorzar en ella y, en consecuencia, el Príncipe debía quedarse a fin de poder acompañarla a casa, como la urbanidad aconseja. El estimaba que tenía el deber de

devolver a Charlotte, sana y salva, a la casa de Eaton Square. A pesar de que lamentaba tener que declinar la oferta de la señora Assingham, cumpliría sin enojo su obligación, por lo que, además del placer que ello en sí mismo comportaba, sus escrúpulos serían motivo de satisfacción tanto para el señor Verver como para Maggie. El Príncipe incluso pudo hilvanar el razonamiento, que confidencialmente comunicó a la señora Assingham, según el cual el señor Verver y Maggie jamás llegarían a comprender del todo lo muy a conciencia que el Príncipe cumplió lo que ahora parecía haber llegado a ser el primero de sus deberes domésticos y, en consecuencia, estimaba constantemente que en modo alguno debía cejar en sus esfuerzos, a fin de que el señor Verver y Maggie llegaran a darse cuenta de ello. A lo cual el Príncipe añadió, con idéntica lucidez, que llegarían a tiempo para la cena, y si no añadió a modo de culminación de sus palabras que sería «maravilloso» que Fanny, al llegar, hallara un momento para ir a Eaton Square y comunicar que Charlotte y él se hallaban airosamente en camino, no fue porque no sintiera el impulso de solicitar tan amable acto. Su seguridad interior, su plan general, tenían en ciertos momentos, y en cuanto a Fanny Assingham hacía referencia, sus lagunas, y nada le hubiera desagradado tanto, a pesar de lo mucho que ello le tentaba, como que la señora Assingham sospechara que se daba en él un elemento de «descaro». Contrariamente, y eso era muy importante, el Príncipe cultivaba desinteresadamente en todo momento un comportamiento considerado y delicado. Fue para él una larga lección ésa de olvidar, en el trato con la gente de raza inglesa, todas las pequeñas supersticiones anejas a la amistad. La propia señora Assingham fue la primera en decir que «daría el parte» puntualmente. En realidad, la señora Assingham se comportó maravillosamente, habiendo llegado a esa cumbre maravillosa en el breve intervalo que medió entre su propuesta a Charlotte y la presente conversación con el Príncipe. Evidentemente, la señora Assingham había aprovechado aquellos cinco minutos para retirarse, en medio de las conversaciones y el bullicio, a su particular tienda de campaña y meditar allí, lo cual demostraba, entre otras muchas cosas, la fuerte impresión que Charlotte le había causado. Y salió de la tienda nuevamente provista de armamento; sin embargo, ¿quién podía decir si la manera en que ahora la señora Assingham trataba al Príncipe era la propia del fragor de la batalla o si equivalía al blanco ondear de la bandera de tregua? De todas maneras, la conversación fue breve, y la generosidad de la oferta de la señora Assingham fue mayor de lo estrictamente necesario:

—Iré a casa de nuestros amigos antes del almuerzo. Y les diré la hora de su llegada.

—Se lo agradezco infinitamente. Dígales que estamos bien. Sonriendo, ella respondió:

—Sí, les diré que están ustedes bien. Realmente, más no se puede pedir. —Efectivamente.

Pero el Príncipe meditó los posibles significados de las palabras de su amiga y añadió:

—Bueno, a mi parecer, tampoco puede usted decir menos. Riendo, Fanny exclamó:

—¡Y no diré menos!

Después Fanny Assingham dejó al Príncipe. Pero al día siguiente por la mañana, tras el desayuno, ambos volvieron a la carga, y no menos valerosamente, por cierto, mientras los carruajes iban y venían, y se intercambiaban despedidas. En aquellos momentos la señora Assingham se encontraba ya en disposición de modificar lo dicho la noche anterior:

—Me parece que mandaré a casa a la doncella, desde Euston, y yo iré directamente a Eaton Square. Así es que pueden estar tranquilos.

A lo que él repuso:

—Realmente estamos muy tranquilos. De todas maneras, no olvide decirles que los dos llegaremos con muy buenos ánimos.

—Con buenos ánimos, muy bien. ¿Charlotte llegará con tiempo para cenar?

—Sí. Creo que es muy improbable que pasemos otra noche fuera de nuestras respectivas casas.

—Bien, en este caso sólo me queda desearles que tengan un día agradable.

Riendo, cuando se disponían a separarse ya, el Príncipe repuso:

—¡Haremos cuanto podamos para que lo sea!

Después de lo cual, y en su debido momento, anunciaron la llegada del coche de los Assingham, y éstos se fueron.

Capítulo XXII

El Príncipe tuvo la impresión de que las perspectivas habían quedado todavía más despejadas. De manera que la media hora que estuvo paseando por la terraza y fumando —el día era espléndido— fue rebosante de plenitud. No cabía la menor duda de que eran muchos los elementos que contribuían a que aquel momento fuera esplendoroso, pero lo que destacaba con luz propia, de modo que parecía que el lugar y el momento fueran un gran cuadro pintado por un genio ofrecido al Príncipe como principal pieza de su colección, barnizado y enmarcado, listo para ser colgado, lo que más resaltaba, para causar mayor deleite, era el dominio absoluto, bello y sin amenazas que el Príncipe tenía de la situación. El reto de la pobre Fanny Assingham carecía de toda importancia. Una de las cosas en que el Príncipe pensó mientras tenía los brazos apoyados en la vieja balaustrada de mármol —tan parecida a otras que había conocido en la Italia de todavía más nobles terrazas— era que Fanny Assingham había sido puesta en su debido lugar, para bien de todos, ella incluida, y que ahora, bamboleándose camino de Londres con este contentamiento, se había convertido en una imagen ajena a la escena. También pensó, ya que su imaginación desarrollaba, por muy buenas razones, una actividad sin precedentes, que, a fin de cuentas, en su trato con las mujeres antes había ganado que perdido. Y constaba, de forma más y más clara en aquellos místicos libros que se llevan en relación con esta clase de comercio, lo cual hacen incluso los hombres de más desordenados hábitos, un balance a su favor, balance favorable que el Príncipe podía dar, por supuesto, en términos generales. ¿Qué hacían, en estos precisos instantes, aquellas maravillosas criaturas, sino forjar combinaciones y conspirar en su beneficio? Sí, así era, desde la propia Maggie, la más maravillosa de todas ellas, hasta la dueña de la casa en que ahora se hallaba el Príncipe, en cuya cabeza se había formado inevitablemente la idea de que Charlotte se quedara por razones que sólo a la dueña de la casa competían, y que había dicho llevada por la benevolencia de su espíritu que a santo de qué el yerno del marido de Charlotte tenía que irse apresuradamente, a no ser que estuviera obligado a ello por plausibles razones, en vez de esperar en compañía de Charlotte. De esta manera, dijo lady Castledean, el Príncipe podría por lo menos hacer lo preciso para que nada ocurriese a Charlotte ni en su casa ni durante los avatares del viaje a Londres; además, si el Príncipe y Charlotte abusaban un poco de la licencia concedida, el hecho de hacerlo juntos les sería de gran ayuda. De esta manera, cuando llegaran a casa, cada uno de ellos podría cómodamente echar las culpas al otro. Además, tanto lady Castledean como Maggie, tanto Charlotte como Fanny Assingham, actuaban en su beneficio sin que se lo solicitaran, sin ejercer presión alguna sobre ellas, sólo en virtud de una vaga noción —definida y consciente sólo, a lo sumo, en Charlotte— de que el Príncipe, en cuanto a manera de ser, en cuanto a carácter, en cuanto a caballero, no era inferior a su notable fortuna.

Pero el Príncipe no sólo tenía ante sí todo lo anterior, sino muchas otras cosas, cosas que se mezclaban hasta el punto de que casi se confundían, para mayor satisfacción de su sentido de la belleza. Las perspectivas eran amplias en todos los órdenes —y las torres de tres catedrales, en tres distintos condados, según le habían dicho, resplandecían como plata mate, con tono de idéntica riqueza—, ¿y acaso no era cierto que el Príncipe se daba más clara cuenta debido precisamente a que lady Castledean había retenido en su casa a un hombre que le interesaba, y que esto constituía una dulce nota de clarificación de los aconteceres del día? Gracias a este detalle, todo encajaba armónicamente. El Príncipe se sentía tan divertido mientras esperaba, ocioso, que en todo momento mantuvo una meditativa sonrisa. Lady Castledean había

retenido a Charlotte porque deseaba retener también al señor Blint, y no podía retenerlo, a pesar de que él se mostraba harto predispuesto a complacer a lady Castledean, sin cubrir las apariencias con una más amplia capa. Castledean se había ido a Londres, dejando la casa entera a disposición de su esposa, quien tuvo el capricho de pasar una tranquila mañana en compañía del señor Blint, hombre joven —decididamente más joven que Su Señoría—, pulido, cortés y bien dotado, deliciosamente hábil en los juegos y en el canto (incluso jugaba al bridge, en cuanto a cantar, igual cantaba las canciones cómicas inglesas que las trágicas francesas); y la presencia de una pareja amiga, si la elección se efectuaba con buen tino, en realidad significaría ausencia, allanaría todas las posibles dificultades. El Príncipe consideraba, con buen humor, que la señora de la casa había quedado bien al elegirle, y ello no perdió su placentero carácter ni siquiera al darse cuenta de que en el transcurso de su vida en Inglaterra había tenido ocasión de meditar más de una vez que, a fin de cuentas, se le hacía reparar que, en cuanto extraño, en cuanto extranjero, e incluso en cuanto simple representante de su esposa y de su suegro, tenía tan poca importancia en el desarrollo de los acontecimientos, que a veces le asignaban funciones un tanto triviales. Ningún otro invitado hubiera podido complacer tan fácilmente a la señora de la casa. Reclamados por asuntos de diversa índole, y en los trenes de primera hora, se fueron todos los hombres activos, suave y fácilmente activos; cada uno de ellos era una bien lubrificada pieza del gran engranaje social, político y administrativo. Y, con carácter primordial, fue reclamado el propio Castledean, que era, aunque parezca incongruente habida cuenta de su manera de ser y características, pieza de muy notable importancia. Pero el Príncipe, si algún asunto tenía no era de esta naturaleza, sino de la propia de haber quedado reducido al no muy glorioso papel de sustituto.

Sin embargo, en el estado de ánimo en que el Príncipe se encontraba en aquellos momentos, esa idea de haber quedado «reducido» en nada mermaba la medida de su actual dicha. En ciertos momentos, dicha idea le recordaba la tan conocida realidad de sus sacrificios, sacrificios que llegaban incluso a la renuncia, para mayor comodidad de su esposa, de la situación que verdaderamente le correspondía en el mundo social, lo que traía en consecuencia, y en último término, que el Príncipe se hallara muy a menudo entre personas inferiores a él, y esto suponía una merma de su valor. Pero, a pesar de que todo lo anterior constituía una realidad harto patente, él estaba dotado de un espíritu que le permitía reírse de todo desde la graciosa ambigüedad de las relaciones entre los ingleses, hasta el hecho de tener en su mente y en su propósito algo hermoso e independiente, algo armonioso y totalmente suyo. El Príncipe no podía tomar seriamente al señor Blint, porque éste era todavía más ajeno a aquel grupo social de lo que lo era un príncipe romano capaz de actuar en pasiva complicidad. Sin embargo, tampoco podía imaginar de qué manera lady Castledean tomaba al señor Blint, porque este asunto se hallaba para él en las insondables profundidades de los equívocos ingleses. Como suele decirse, conocía «bien» a los ingleses, había convivido con ellos, había pasado días en sus casas, había cenado, cazado y hecho muchas otras cosas con ellos, pero el número de interrogantes que sobre los ingleses tenía el Príncipe antes había aumentado que menguado, por lo que para él las enseñanzas de la experiencia quedaban reducidas a impresiones subsidiarias. Lo único que él sabía con certeza acerca de los ingleses era que les *situations nettes* no les gustaban. Por nada del mundo estaban dispuestos a aceptarlas. El genio nacional inglés, el éxito nacional inglés, siempre había consistido en evitar dichas situaciones en todo momento. Con complacencia, los ingleses estimaban que este peculiar talento era lo que ellos denominaban su maravillosa capacidad de transigir, cuya influencia impregnaba de tal manera el lugar en que ahora se encontraba nuestro héroe que parecía, de una manera más clara, que la tierra y el aire, la luz y el color, los campos, las colinas y el cielo, los pueblos de los condados azul verdoso y las frías catedrales, debieran el especial matiz de su tono a dicha capacidad. Realmente, hallándose uno en presencia de aquel cuadro, era preciso reconocer que el talento inglés había triunfado, y que a él se debía la bien asentada solidez, la riqueza de tono de niebla marina en la que los pueblos de brillantes oropeles, pueblos que se consideraba envidiosos, siempre habían refrescado la vista. Pero, también al mismo tiempo, era la causa de que, en ciertos momentos, por muy familiarizado que uno estuviera con aquella realidad, quedara intrigado por la presencia del elemento de podredumbre en medio de aquel frescor, de frescor en la podredumbre, de inocencia en la culpa, de culpa en la inocencia. Había otras terrazas de mármol desde las que se divisaban más purpúreas perspectivas en las que el Príncipe hubiera sabido qué pensar y, en consecuencia, hubiera podido gozar por lo menos del leve placer intelectual de una consciente relación entre las apariencias y lo que significaban. Cierto era que, en las actuales circunstancias, una mentalidad inquisitiva era más vivamente estimulada; pero, por desdicha, las mentalidades de esta naturaleza habían reconocido que el resultado de su atención e ingenio muy a menudo consistía sencillamente en toparse con

un muro, en hallarse ante una laguna o en acabar en un estado de definitiva desorientación. Además, lo cual era de suma importancia, para él nada tenía interés, en lo tocante a la relación entre el escenario que le rodeaba y su propia conciencia, salvo los hechos que más directamente le afectaban.

Los ensoñados proyectos que lady Castledean había forjado para aquella mañana con respecto al señor Blint, después de que todas las grandes amistades hubieran regresado, evidentemente habían llegado ya al punto de interpretar al piano, juntamente con dicho señor, en una de las numerosas estancias pequeñas destinadas a usos menos multitudinarios que las grandes. Los deseos de lady Castledean se habían convertido en realidad, y las deseadas circunstancias se habían producido. Esto indujo al Príncipe a preguntarse dónde estaría Charlotte, ya que no creía que fuera un discordante tercer elemento, lo cual hubiera equivalido a aceptar el papel de simple espectadora, en el dúo formado por lady Castledean y el señor Blint. El resultado de todo lo anterior para el Príncipe, tanto en los aspectos menos alentadores como en los más, fue que el exquisito día se abrió como una gran flor fragante que él podía coger cuando quisiera. Pero quería ofrecer a Charlotte aquella flor y, mientras paseaba por la terraza, desde la que se veían dos fachadas de la casa, alzó la vista a las ventanas abiertas a la mañana de abril, y se preguntó cuál de ellas sería la del aposento de su amiga. Poco tardó en llegar el momento en que este interrogante quedara despejado, ya que la vio aparecer en lo alto, como llamada por el sonido de sus pasos en las losas de la terraza. Charlotte se había apoyado en el alféizar para mirar abajo, y allí quedó unos instantes observándole sonriente. Éste inmediatamente reparó en que Charlotte iba con sombrero y chaqueta, lo cual indicaba que no se disponía a reunirse, bellamente descubierta la cabeza y con sombrilla, allí, en el lugar en que el Príncipe se hallaba, sino que estaba dispuesta a que dieran un paso que les llevaría mucho más lejos. Desde la noche anterior, el Príncipe había pensado intensamente en este paso, aunque no había meditado los detalles, levemente dificultosos, que comportaba. No había tenido la oportunidad de hacerle una propuesta definitiva, pero ahora el rostro de Charlotte le hizo comprender que ella había intuido la propuesta que él no había podido hacerle. Tenían esa clase de impulsos idénticos. Repetidas veces los habían tenido con anterioridad. Y si esas coincidencias siempre infalibles, en modo alguno preparadas de antemano, daban la medida en que dos personas eran, como se dice vulgarmente, la una para la otra, jamás había habido unión en el mundo que hubiera quedado tan endulzada como aquélla por su perfección. Pero lo que en realidad ocurría más a menudo era que la clarividencia de Charlotte llegaba más lejos que la del Príncipe. Los dos eran conscientes de la misma necesidad en el mismo momento, pero, por norma general, ella veía con más claridad la manera de satisfacerla. Algo en la larga mirada que ahora le dirigía Charlotte desde la antigua ventana gris, algo en la inclinación del sombrero, en el color del pañuelo que llevaba al cuello, algo en la prolongada quietud de su sonrisa, repentinamente iluminó y puso de relieve en la mente del Príncipe toda la riqueza que suponía poder contar con ella. Tenía el Príncipe la mano dispuesta para coger aquella riqueza en la flor abierta del día, pero ¿qué significaba el esplendente instante sino que Charlotte ya tenía en justa respuesta la mano inteligentemente adelantada? De modo que, en aquellos instantes, entre los dos se cruzó el conocimiento de que su copa rebosaba y, sin que sus ojos dejaran de mirarla, llevándola firme y equilibradamente con las manos, comenzaron a beber, y al catarla la alabaron. Sin embargo, pocos instantes después, el Príncipe rompía el silencio:

—Sólo falta la luna, una mandolina y un poco de peligro para que esto sea una serenata.

Desde lo alto, Charlotte repuso:

—¡Contentémonos con esto!

Después de decir estas palabras, separó un blanco capullo de rosa de la parte frontal de su vestido, y lo arrojó al Príncipe.

El Príncipe lo cogió al vuelo, y volvió a mirarla después de que ésta le hubiera contemplado mientras se ponía el capullo en el ojal. En italiano, en voz baja e intensa, el Príncipe dijo:

—¡Baja, corriendo!

En voz clara y leve, ella repuso:

—¡Voy, voy!

Y, al instante, dejó al Príncipe esperándola.

Éste volvió a pasear por la terraza, con detenimiento, y su mirada reposaba allá a lo lejos, como ya había hecho a menudo, en la altiva tonalidad oscura de acuarela de la más distante ciudad catedralicia. Aquel lugar, con su gran iglesia y su fácil acceso, con las torres que indicaban su situación, con su carga de historia inglesa, con sus atractivas características, con su reconocido interés, aquel lugar le había repetido su nombre durante la mitad de la noche anterior, y su nombre se había transformado en otro, en un nombre

que podía pronunciarse y que estaba revestido de decencia, por el supremo sentido de comprensión de las cosas que ahora latía en el Príncipe. No había hecho más que repetirse: «Gloucester, Gloucester, Gloucester», igual que si el más penetrante significado recibido en los años inmediatos anteriores quedara intensamente expresado por aquel nombre. Este significado era, en realidad, que la situación del Príncipe seguía siendo en gran manera coherente consigo misma, y que ellos dos, Charlotte y él, se hallaban juntos en el esplendor de esta verdad. Todas las circunstancias presentes se aunaban para proclamarlo, y los labios de la mañana se lo decían lanzándoles el aliento al rostro. El Príncipe sabía por qué, desde el principio de su matrimonio, había buscado con tanta paciencia aquella congruencia, sabía por qué había renunciado a tanto y se había aburrido tanto, sabía por qué había buscado, sobre la base de todos los convencionalismos, sobre la base de haberse vendido, en cierto sentido, una *situation nette*. Todo lo había hecho a fin de que su libertad, ¿de qué otra manera cabía llamarla?, fuera perfecta en los presentes momentos, redondeada y esplendente, como una perla. No había luchado y de nada se había apoderado, sólo tomaba lo que le ofrecían y la perla, con su exquisita calidad y rareza, había caído en la palma de su mano. Y allí estaba precisamente la perla encarnada. Su tamaño y su valor fueron en aumento al aparecer la señora Verver en el quicio de una de las puertas pequeñas. Avanzó en silencio hacia el Príncipe, mientras éste iba a su encuentro. La gran escala de la fachada de la mansión de Matcham multiplicó, en la dorada mañana, los instantes de su encuentro y la sucesión de sus sensaciones. Cuando Charlotte estaba ya muy cerca, el Príncipe, le dijo:

—Gloucester, Gloucester, Gloucester. ¡Mira, allá!

Charlotte sabía exactamente hacia dónde debía mirar:

—Sí, es una de las ciudades más bonitas. Creo que hay claustros, o torres, o algo parecido.

Y sus ojos, a pesar de que sus labios sonreían, tenían una expresión casi grave cuando volvieron a mirar al Príncipe. Terminó su frase:

—O la tumba del rey.

El Príncipe dijo:

—Tenemos que ver a ese viejo rey, tenemos que visitar la catedral, tenemos que conocer la ciudad entera.

Como remate a sus palabras, exclamó:

—¡Si pudiéramos aprovechar plenamente esta oportunidad!

Y, después, mientras volvía a clavar la vista en los ojos de Charlotte, en busca de todo lo que pudiera ofrecerle, el Príncipe dijo:

—Parece que el día sea una gran copa dorada que debamos apurar juntos.

—Me parece igual, porque siempre me induces a sentir lo que tú sientes, de manera que sé lo que sientes a leguas de distancia.

Después de estas palabras, Charlotte preguntó:

—Y ya que hablamos de copas doradas, ¿te acuerdas de aquella tan hermosa, real, que te ofrecí hace tanto tiempo y que no quisiste aceptar?

Para avivar la memoria del Príncipe, Charlotte añadió enseguida:

—Fue poco antes de tu matrimonio. Era una copa de cristal dorado que vimos en una tiendecilla de Bloomsbury.

—¡Ah, sí, ciertamente!

Pero hubo en su tono cierta nota de sorpresa, y tuvo que hacer un leve esfuerzo para acordarse. Ahora dijo:

—Aquel objeto siniestro con grieta que intentaste endilgarme, y aquel pequeño judío estafador que entendía el italiano y que se puso de tu parte. Sin embargo, inmediatamente añadió, con una sonrisa:

—Y tengo la impresión de que ahora nos hallamos en una ocasión que, en cuanto a ocasión, también está agrietada.

Hablaban en voz un tanto baja, por cuanto se hallaban dominados, aunque a cierta distancia, por filas y filas de ventanas, y este tono de voz causaba a cada uno de los dos la sensación de absorber algo lenta y profundamente. Charlotte dijo:

—¿No crees que piensas demasiado en «grietas» y que les tienes demasiado miedo? Yo me arriesgo a las grietas, y a menudo me he acordado de aquella copa y de aquel pillo judío, y me he preguntado si la habrá vendido. Aquel hombre me impresionó en gran manera.

—Bueno, también tú le causaste a él una gran impresión, y me atrevería a decir que, si vuelves a su

tienda, podrás comprobar que todavía guarda para ti semejante tesoro.

Guardó silencio unos instantes y añadió:

—Y, por lo que a las grietas se refiere, arriésgate a ellas todo lo que quieras, pero lo que no debes hacer es arriesgarte a ellas por mí.

El Príncipe había hablado con toda la alegría de su serenidad que, ahora, estaba sólo muy levemente temblorosa. Añadió:

—Como muy bien sabes, me guío por mis supersticiones. Y ésta es la razón por la que sé la suerte que hoy nos aguarda. Hoy todos los augurios nos son favorables.

Apoyada en la balaustrada, de cara a la amplia perspectiva, Charlotte guardó silencio unos instantes y, poco después, el Príncipe advirtió que tenía los ojos cerrados. Charlotte dijo:

—Yo sólo me guío por una cosa.

La mano de la joven reposaba sobre la piedra calentada por el sol y, como sea que se hallaban de espaldas a la casa, el Príncipe cubrió con su mano la de Charlotte, quien dijo:

—Me guío por ti. Me guío por ti.

Los dos guardaron silencio unos instantes, hasta que el Príncipe habló de nuevo acompañando sus palabras con un ademán que les dio énfasis:

—Bueno, ahora lo que realmente hace falta es que nos guiemos por mi reloj.

Miró la hora y añadió:

—Ya son las once, si nos quedamos a almorzar aquí, perderemos la tarde.

Al oír estas palabras, Charlotte abrió los ojos desmesuradamente.

—No hay la menor necesidad de que nos quedemos a almorzar. ¿No ves que ya estoy dispuesta para que nos vayamos?

Sí, ya se había dado cuenta pero necesitaba que Charlotte le dijera más:

—¿Quieres decir que ya has dispuesto…?

—Esto es muy fácil. Mi doncella se va con mi equipaje. Dile a tu ayuda de cámara que se lleve el tuyo, y que los dos se vayan juntos.

—¿Quieres decir que podemos irnos inmediatamente?

Por fin, Charlotte le dio la explicación completa:

—Uno de los coches de que ayer hablé seguramente habrá llegado y estará esperándonos.

Sonriendo, añadió:

—Si tus supersticiones nos favorecen, mis disposiciones también. Y las unas refuerzan a las otras.

El Príncipe inquirió:

—En este caso, ¿habías pensado ya en ir a Gloucester?

Charlotte pareció dudar, pero sólo fue efecto de su peculiar modo de expresión, y dijo:

—Pensé que tú pensarías en ir. Afortunadamente tenemos esa clase de coincidencias. Con ellas puedes alimentar tus supersticiones, si quieres. Me gusta que sea Gloucester el lugar al que vamos. «Glo'ster, Glo'ster», como tú pronuncias, de manera que parece una palabra de una vieja canción.

Charlotte añadió:

—Sin embargo, estoy segura de que Glo'ster, Glo'ster será una ciudad encantadora, allí podremos almorzar, después de habernos desembarazado de la servidumbre y del equipaje. Tendremos a nuestra disposición tres o cuatro horas por lo menos.

Para terminar, dijo:

—Desde allí, podemos mandar un telegrama.

Pronunció estas palabras lisa y llanamente, como si la idea se le hubiera ocurrido en aquel mismo instante, por lo que el Príncipe hizo su siguiente pregunta con la misma cautela:

—En ese caso, ¡lady Castledean…!

—Ni siquiera sueña en que nos quedemos a almorzar.

El Príncipe aceptó la contestación, pero no por ello dejó de pensar; por fin preguntó:

—¿En qué sueña, pues?

—En el señor Blint, la pobrecilla sólo sueña en el señor Blint.

La sonrisa que Charlotte le dirigió fue de gran franqueza:

—¿Es que tengo que decirte con toda claridad que lady Castledean no quiere que nos quedemos? Pidió que nos quedáramos únicamente para que los otros invitados vieran que no se quedaba sola con el señor Blint. Ahora ya hemos cumplido nuestra misión, los invitados se han ido, lady Castledean está

perfectamente enterada.

Como en un vago eco, el Príncipe dijo:

—¿«Enterada»?

—Está enterada de que nos gustan las catedrales, que inevitablemente nos detendremos para verlas, que si es preciso nos desviaremos de nuestro camino, siempre que tengamos la oportunidad, y que esto es lo que nuestras respectivas familias esperan que hagamos, y quedarán defraudadas si no lo hacemos.

La señora Verver concluyó:

—Esto, en calidad de *forestieri* es lo que nos atrae, aun cuando la atracción que sentimos sea más general y más fuerte.

El Príncipe siguió mirándola con fijeza cuando le preguntó a continuación:

—¿Y sabes cuál es el tren…?

—Con toda exactitud. Paddinton, llegada a las 6.50. Con ello tenemos océanos de tiempo a nuestra disposición, y podremos cenar a la hora de costumbre en casa. Como sea que Maggie se encontrará, como dos y dos son cuatro, en Eaton Square, tengo el gran honor de invitarte a cenar.

Durante un rato, el Príncipe siguió mirándola fijamente. Transcurrió un minuto antes de que volviera a hablar.

—Muchas gracias, acepto con sumo placer la invitación.

Y, al momento, preguntó:

—¿Y el tren para Gloucester?

—Un tren de cercanías. Sale a las 11.22 con varias paradas en el trayecto, pero lo recorre en menos de una hora, no sé exactamente cuánto menos. En consecuencia, tenemos tiempo, aunque tampoco podemos perderlo más.

El Príncipe se irguió como impulsado por sus palabras y volvió a consultar el reloj mientras los dos se dirigían a la puerta por la que Charlotte había salido. Pero él también tuvo que hacer preguntas y altos en el trayecto, todo ello para mayor encanto y mayor misterio:

—¿Y miraste la guía de ferrocarriles, sin que yo nada te dijera?

Riendo, repuso:

—¡Oh, querido! He tenido ocasión de verte consultar una guía de ferrocarriles. Para hacerlo bien, hace falta tener sangre anglosajona.

—¿«Sangre»? ¡Tú tienes la sangre de todas las razas!

Estaban detenidos, el uno frente al otro. Él exclamó:

—¡Eres terrible!

La joven pensó que el Príncipe podía expresarlo del modo que le diera la gana, y dijo:

—También sé la posada a la que iremos.

—¿A cuál?

—Hay dos. Ya lo verás. Espero haber elegido la adecuada.

Sonriendo, Charlotte añadió:

—Y creo que me acuerdo de la tumba.

—¡Ah, la tumba!

Pero al Príncipe cualquier tumba le parecía bien. Dijo:

—Sin embargo, ahora pienso que después de haber estado preparando con tanto cuidado este proyecto, para proponértelo, resulta que tú lo has ejecutado sin que yo te haya dicho nada.

—Es posible que quisieras ofrecérmelo; ahora bien, ¿cómo te explicas que no hayas podido ocultármelo?

—No lo sé. ¿Y cómo me las arreglaré para ocultarte algo el día que lo desee?

—Bueno, con referencia a las cosas que no quiera saber, te prometo que me portaré como una estúpida.

Cuando llegaron a la puerta, Charlotte se detuvo para decir:

—Durante estos días, durante todo el día de ayer, anoche, esta mañana, lo he deseado todo.

Bien, nada había que objetar.

—Lo tendrás todo.

Capítulo XXIII

Fanny Assingham, al llegar a la ciudad, puso en práctica su segunda idea; a este fin, mandó al coronel a su club para que desayunara allí y despachó a la criada, en coche de alquiler, con los diversos efectos del matrimonio, rumbo a Cadogan Place. El resultado de lo anterior fue, para los dos cónyuges, un estado de ocupación tan ininterrumpida que el día transcurrió sin que prácticamente hubiera habido contacto entre los dos. Cenaron juntos, por cierto, pero fue precisamente durante el trayecto hacia el lugar en que cenaron y el trayecto de regreso a su casa, cuando menos hablaron, tanto la una como el otro. Fanny estaba absorta en sus propios pensamientos, que la aislaban de lo que la rodeaba mucho más que la capa amarillo limón con la que protegía sus hombros desnudos, y su marido, enfrentado a aquel silencio, se mostraba menos dispuesto de lo usual en él, cuando se hallaba en aquel brete, a iniciar el fuego, según serían sus palabras. Por aquel entonces los silencios entre los dos eran, por lo general, más largos, y la transición del silencio a la conversación, más brusca. A una charla se lanzaron, a modo de culminación del día, hacia la medianoche. La señora Assingham, de nuevo en su hogar, lo que le producía cierta sensación de fatiga, ascendió hasta la primera planta, donde se dejó caer, como agobiada, en una gran silla dorada, veneciana, situada en la salita ante el salón, silla que convirtió, gracias a la preocupación de expresión de su cara, en una especie de trono de meditación. Por su aspecto oriental, según su libre interpretación del orientalismo, la señora Assingham recordaba un poco a la inmemorial esfinge presta al fin a romper a hablar. El coronel, a su lado, algo tenía de viejo peregrino del desierto acampado al pie de un monumento aunque, poco después, en una operación de reconocimiento, penetró en el salón, en donde inspeccionó las ventanas y las fallebas de las ventanas, recorriendo con la vista el lugar con aire de ser, en una sola pieza, amo de la casa y administrador, comandante y contribuyente. Luego regresó al lado de su esposa, ante la cual quedó en pie esperando por el momento. Pero la señora Assingham también decidió esperar, limitándose a alzar la vista y con faz inescrutable mirar a su marido. En estas maniobras de menor envergadura y en esta consciente paciencia había algo parecido a una tregua en la vieja costumbre de mantener conversaciones divergentes, de comunicarse con interpretaciones erróneas de tiempos. Ahora parecía que el placer de estas conversaciones, tan familiar a los cónyuges, pudiera llevarlos a una situación claramente peligrosa; pero también se percibía en el aire, de modo sensible pero incoherente, que por el momento ninguna situación llegaría a poder ser vulgarmente calificada de peligrosa.

En realidad, incluso cabía la posibilidad de que en el rostro de la señora Assingham hubiera una expresión de sutil percepción de una más fina sensibilidad que ella había conseguido que se formara en su marido, una sensibilidad con respecto a la situación en que ella se encontraba, que, por raro que parezca, se disponía a rechazar. Pero se trataba de una flor sobre la que sólo muy levemente se podría respirar y esto fue, a fin de cuentas, lo que la señora Assingham hizo. Le constaba que no tenía necesidad alguna de decir que había dedicado toda la tarde a sus amigos de Eaton Square, y que hacerlo no hubiera sido más que volcar precipitadamente las impresiones recogidas, en grandes cantidades y puestas en grandes cestos, como las púrpuras uvas de Matcham en tiempo de vendimia. Mientras, el proceso de selección de estas impresiones se estaba desarrollando ahora de manera inconfundible y, por parte del coronel, era objeto de unas abstenciones y unas discreciones que casi llegaban a solemnidades; solemnidades, por otra parte, que a nada comprometían al coronel como no fuera a confesarse a sí mismo que tenía clara conciencia de navegar

en aguas profundas, y su respetuosa actitud ante este hecho había consistido en no perder de vista a su mujer sin decir ni media palabra. Ni siquiera un instante, durante la aventura de su mujer, había el coronel abandonado la ribera del místico lago, sino que, al contrario, se había colocado en un lugar en que pudiera recibir las señales de su mujer en caso de que ésta le necesitara. La necesidad de ella podía producirse en el caso de que el casco de su embarcación se rajara, en cuyo momento, el deber inmediato del coronel hubiera sido arrojarse al agua, de una manera u otra. Evidentemente, la actual actitud del coronel consistía en contemplar a su mujer allí, en medio de las oscuras aguas, y en preguntarse si acaso aquella muda mirada que le dirigía significaba que el casco se estaba rajando realmente. El coronel se hallaba tan presto al socorro que parecía que su espíritu se hubiera ya despojado de la chaqueta y del chaleco. Sin embargo, antes de que el coronel se arrojara a las aguas, es decir, antes de que formulara una pregunta, advirtió, no sin alivio, que su cónyuge se dirigía hacia la orilla. Vio cómo Fanny Assingham remaba constantemente, siempre un poquito más cerca, y, por fin, oyó el topetazo de la barca contra la orilla. Fue un sonido claramente perceptible; ahora la señora Assingham desembarcó:

—Estábamos todos equivocados. No hay nada.

—¿Nada?

Al pronunciar esta palabra, la actitud del coronel fue la misma que si ofreciera la mano a su mujer para ayudarla a subir la cuesta de la orilla.

—Nada entre Charlotte Verver y el Príncipe. Al principio estaba inquieta, pero ya me he tranquilizado. En realidad me había equivocado de medio a medio. Nada hay.

Bob Assingham observó:

—Yo creía que precisamente esto era lo que siempre decías insistentemente. Desde el principio, diste por supuesto la rectitud de los dos.

—No, nunca he dado nada por supuesto, salvo mi predisposición a preocuparme.

Gravemente, sin moverse de la silla, Fanny Assingham prosiguió:

—Hasta ahora no había tenido la oportunidad de ver y juzgar. Y vi, he visto. Y, ahora, sé.

Con más énfasis aún, repitió la palabra allí, en su trono de infalibilidad, lo que le obligó a levantar más la cabeza.

—Sé.

El coronel aceptó esta manifestación, al principio, en silencio; pero, luego, preguntó:

—¿Quieres decir que te lo han dicho ellos?

—No. Jamás he querido decir algo tan absurdo. En primer lugar, no se lo he preguntado. En segundo lugar, su palabra en esta materia carece de importancia.

Al escuchar estas palabras, el extrañado coronel observó:

—Bueno, a nosotros nos lo dirían.

Durante unos instantes se reflejó en el rostro de Fanny la exasperación que le producían las bruscas salidas del coronel, pasando siempre por encima de los más bellos parterres de Fanny. Pero, a pesar de todo, estimó que debía atemperar su ironía, por lo que se limitó a decir:

—En este caso, cuando te lo digan, espero que tengas la amabilidad de comunicármelo.

El coronel levantó la barbilla y con el dorso de la mano se acarició el pelo que en ella crecía, mientras miraba fijamente de soslayo a su mujer, y decía:

—Yo no he dicho que forzosamente tengan que decirme todo lo que hacen.

—Pase lo que pase, forzosamente tendrán que mantener la boca cerrada, espero. Ahora sólo hablo de ellos gracias a lo que he podido observar. Con esto me basta. No necesito más.

Después de unos instantes de silencio, Fanny Assingham declaró:

—Y son maravillosos.

En este punto, el coronel se mostró de acuerdo:

—Ciertamente, a mi parecer lo son.

—Pues más te lo parecerían si más supieras. Pero no sabes porque no ves. Su situación es demasiado extraordinaria.

Esto último, a juzgar por el tono de las palabras de la señora Assingham, era lo que el coronel no veía, pero se mostró dispuesto a intentarlo:

—¿«Demasiado»?

—Demasiado extraordinaria para que pueda creerse, quería decir. Sí, cuando uno no ve. Pero precisamente esto, en cierta manera, es lo que los salva. Lo toman seriamente.

El coronel seguía, a su aire, el raciocinio de su mujer:

—¿Su situación?

—La parte increíble de su situación. La convierten en verosímil.

—¿Quieres decir verosímil para ti?

Fanny Assingham volvió a mirarle en silencio durante un rato. Por fin, dijo:

—Creen en sí mismos. Aceptan la realidad tal como es. Y esto los salva.

—Pero si la realidad tal como es constituye precisamente su oportunidad para…

—Constituye su oportunidad para lo que te dije la primera vez que vino Charlotte. Es su oportunidad para la idea que yo entonces estaba tan segura de que Charlotte tenía.

El coronel efectuó un visible esfuerzo para recordar:

—¡Bueno! ¡Tu idea en diferentes momentos acerca de las ideas de ellos!

Esta oscura procesión apareció ante el coronel y, a pesar de que éste puso a contribución su mejor voluntad, tuvo que limitarse a contemplarla. El coronel dijo:

—¿Estás hablando ahora de algo que pueda representar para ti una cómoda base en la que quedar asentada?

Una vez más, durante unos instantes ella se limitó a mirar furiosamente a su marido. Dijo:

—He vuelto a mis antiguas creencias, y al hacerlo…

Calló. El coronel preguntó:

—¿Qué?

—He visto que estaba en lo cierto. Sí, porque te aseguro que me había alejado mucho de ellas. Ahora he vuelto al redil y espero quedarme en él.

Tras breve meditación, Fanny Assingham declaró:

—Son magníficos.

—¿El Príncipe y Charlotte?

—El Príncipe y Charlotte. Precisamente por esto destacan.

Fanny Assingham explicó mejor sus palabras:

—Y lo magnífico es que tienen miedo de sí mismos, quiero decir miedo por los otros.

Después de hacer un esfuerzo para seguir el pensamiento de su cónyuge, el coronel preguntó:

—¿Miedo por el señor Verver y Maggie? ¿Miedo de qué?

—De ellos mismos.

Intrigado, volvió a preguntar:

—¿De ellos mismos? ¿Del señor Verver y de Maggie?

La señora Assingham no perdió la paciencia ni la lucidez:

—Sí, y también de semejante ceguera. Aunque principalmente de su propio peligro.

El coronel meditó. Luego, inquirió:

—¿Y el peligro es la ceguera?

—El peligro está en su situación. A estas alturas, no hace falta que te diga todos los elementos que concurren en su situación. Afortunadamente y para su consuelo, entre los muchos elementos que se dan en su situación no se cuenta la ceguera. Quiero decir la ceguera de ellos.

Acto seguido, la señora Assingham aclaró:

—La ceguera se da, primordialmente, en su marido.

El coronel quedó un tanto parado. Pero éste era un asunto que quería aclarar:

—¿El marido de quién?

—El señor Verver. La ceguera afecta primordialmente al señor Verver. Sí, y esto lo saben, lo ven. Pero también afecta a la esposa.

Mientras Fanny Assingham seguía mirando al coronel con sombría mirada que mal se compadecía con el relativo oportunismo de sus aseveraciones, éste preguntó:

—¿Qué esposa?

Y, como fuera que seguía en silencio, hosca la mirada, el coronel insistió:

—¿La del Príncipe?

Como si hablase para sí misma, la señora Assingham dijo:

—La de Maggie, la de la mismísima Maggie.

El coronel, intrigado, preguntó:

—¿Tan ciega consideras a Maggie?

—El problema no consiste en lo que yo considere. El problema consiste en la convicción que guía al Príncipe y a Charlotte, quienes tienen mejores oportunidades que yo para juzgar.

El coronel volvió a dudar:

—¿Estás segura de que tienen mejores oportunidades de juzgar?

La señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿Y qué es su extraordinaria situación, su extraordinaria relación, sino una oportunidad?

—Querida, esta oportunidad, la de su extraordinaria relación y situación, la tienes tú tanto como ellos.

A cuyas palabras, replicó ella con cierta vivacidad:

—Con la diferencia, querido, de que ni la relación ni la situación son asunto mío, dicho sea sin ganas de ofenderte. Veo el buque en el que van embarcados, pero, a Dios gracias, yo no estoy a bordo.

Después de un silencio, la señora Assingham añadió:

—Sin embargo, hoy, en Eaton Square, hoy he visto.

—¿Qué has visto?

La señora Assingham siguió con su reticencia:

—Muchas cosas. Más cosas de las que jamás había visto. Ha sido, y que Dios me perdone, como si viera por ellos, quiero decir por los otros. Ha sido como si hubiera ocurrido algo, algo que no sé lo que es, salvo que es como un efecto de esos días pasados con ellos en aquella casa que, o bien ha iluminado la realidad, o bien ha agudizado mi vista.

Los ojos de la pobre señora estaban fijos en su marido y en ellos había un brillo que no era el de una más intensa penetración, sino el de determinado portento que, en diversas ocasiones, el coronel había tenido ocasión de advertir. Evidentemente, la señora Assingham deseaba infundir seguridad a su esposo, pero, para que así ocurriera, era preciso al parecer que dos grandes, sinceras y brillantes lágrimas se formaran lentamente en sus lacrimales. Estas lágrimas produjeron, de inmediato y como de costumbre, un efecto directo en el coronel: advirtió claramente que su esposa tenía que infundirle seguridad por medio de hacerle pensar exactamente lo mismo que pensaba ella. El coronel estaba plenamente dispuesto a aceptar el pensamiento de su esposa y a regirse por él, tan pronto como su esposa lo manifestara. El problema radicaba en que la expresión del pensamiento de su mujer exigía infinidad de giros, vueltas y revueltas. Por ejemplo, la sinuosidad quedó de relieve cuando la señora Assingham procedió a explicar lo que había ocurrido aquella tarde:

—Ha sido como si supiera mejor que nunca lo que les hace…

Al advertir que el pensamiento paralizaba su lengua, el coronel la apremió:

—¿Lo que les hace qué?

—Lo que les hace, al Príncipe y a Charlotte, tomarlo todo tal como lo toman. Saber cómo tomarlo ya es asunto difícil en sí, y es preciso reconocer que han estado mucho tiempo esforzándose en ver.

Después de una pausa, la señora Assingham prosiguió diciendo:

—Y, tal como he dicho, hoy ha ocurrido algo que ha sido como si me dieran un tremendo empujón y, de pronto, viera a través de sus ojos.

Después de decirlo y como si quisiera sacudirse del cuerpo su maleficio, se puso bruscamente en pie. Pero quedó allí, envuelta en la penumbra, mientras el coronel, con su aspecto de ser «todo un tipo», alto, seco y austero, al que cierta evocación de la blancura de las nieves inaccesibles, allí, en la corbata, la pechera de la camisa y el chaleco, daba acentos de dureza, esperaba, esperaba lo que su mujer pudiera hacer; de manera que a hora tan tardía y en la casa silenciosa, bien hubieran podido ser dos extraños aventureros mundanos que, para aliviar la dura tensión de sus espíritus, se habían reunido en un extraño rincón para hacerse siniestras confidencias de medianoche. La atención de Fanny Assingham se centraba mecánicamente en los objetos de adorno dispuestos con excesiva prodigalidad en las paredes, objetos que, al reconocerlos en aquellos momentos, habían perdido la capacidad de suscitar tanto su cariño como su compunción. Fanny Assingham dijo:

—Puedo imaginar la manera en que todo se desarrolla. Sí, es fácil comprenderlo.

Pero, al momento, exclamó:

—¡Sin embargo, no quiero extraviarme! ¡No, no quiero extraviarme!

—¿Quieres decir que quieres evitar los errores?

No, no. No quería decir eso, ni mucho menos. La señora Assingham sabía muy bien lo que quería decir:

—Nunca cometo errores. Pero perpetro delitos con el pensamiento. Y siguió hablando con suma intensidad:

—Soy un ser temible. Momentos hay en que me parece que nada me importa todo lo que he hecho, o lo que pienso o imagino o temo o acepto, momentos hay en que pienso que volvería a hacerlo, en que pienso que soy capaz de hacer cosas.

En la natural frialdad del debate, el coronel exclamó:

—¡Oh!

—Sí, en el caso de que tú me hubieras impulsado a volver a ser como era antes por naturaleza. Afortunadamente, jamás lo has hecho. Lo has hecho todo, has hecho todo lo demás; pero esto no, esto no lo has hecho.

La señora Assingham guardó silencio. A continuación, declaró:

—Pero lo que verdaderamente no quiero es instigarlos ni protegerlos.

El coronel meditó estas palabras y dijo:

—¿Y de qué vas a protegerlos? Según tus muy sólidas y actuales creencias, no han hecho nada que los ponga en peligro.

Realmente, en esta ocasión el coronel casi consiguió que su cónyuge se tambaleara. La señora Assingham repuso:

—Bueno, pues de un súbito sobresalto. Quiero decir de la alarma de lo que Maggie pueda pensar.

—Bueno, pero si toda tu idea consiste en que Maggie no piensa…

Una vez más, Fanny Assingham esperó un poco antes de contestar:

—Esto no es toda mi idea. Nada hay que sea toda mi idea. Sí, porque, como te he dicho, hoy he percibido que es mucho lo que hay en el ambiente.

Secamente, el coronel dijo:

—Ah, bueno, en el ambiente.

—Lo que hay en el ambiente siempre acaba materializándose, ¿o no?

Luego, prosiguió:

—Y Maggie es una personita dotada de gran curiosidad. Como sea que esta tarde estaba yo «lanzada» a ver más de lo que había visto en cualquier otro momento, pues bien, también he visto algo con mayor claridad que nunca, debido a cierta razón.

—¿A cierta razón? ¿Qué razón?

Como sea que su esposa nada respondió, por el momento el coronel insistió:

—¿Has advertido algún síntoma en Maggie? ¿La has visto diferente en un sentido u otro?

—Maggie es siempre tan diferente de las restantes personas que hay en el mundo que es difícil saber cuándo es diferente a sí misma.

Después de un brevísimo silencio, la señora Assingham dijo:

—Pero me ha inducido a pensar en ella de manera diferente. Me ha acompañado en coche.

—¿Aquí?

—Primero a Portland Place, donde ha dejado a su padre; sí, porque de vez en cuando lo deja. Por eso he podido estar con ella un poco más. Pero Maggie ha dicho que el coche la esperase y después de tomar el té en su casa, me ha traído aquí. Lo ha hecho con el mismo propósito. Luego se ha ido a su casa a pesar de que yo le he transmitido un mensaje del Príncipe donde le indicaba que actuara de otra manera. El Príncipe y Charlotte seguramente han llegado ya, si es que han llegado, con la idea de ir juntos a Eaton Square y, allí, tener a Maggie sentada en la mesa durante la cena. Maggie tiene allá todo cuanto necesita. Tiene ropa.

El coronel lo ignoraba, pero sólo indirectamente lo dio a entender:

—¿Tiene una muda?

—Veinte mudas, y vestidos. Y todo lo que quieras. En realidad, Maggie se viste pensando tanto en su padre como en su marido y en ella misma. Conserva sus habitaciones en casa de su padre casi igual que cuando era soltera, de la misma manera que el chico tiene su cuarto de jugar, su segundo cuarto de jugar, en el que te aseguro que la señora Noble, cuando acompaña al muchacho, se siente totalmente a sus anchas. La señora Noble ocupa allí tanto espacio y se siente *si bien* que si Charlotte quisiera invitar a una o dos amigas a pasar unos días con ella, en su propia casa, y valga la expresión, casi no podría aposentarlas.

Aquél era un cuadro que el coronel, anfitrión ahorrativo, comprendía bastante bien:

—¿Tanto espacio ocupan Maggie y el niño?

—Tanto.

El coronel dio su opinión:

—Es un poco extraño, realmente.

La calificación del coronel agradó a su cónyuge:

—Es lo que yo digo. No diré que sea algo más que extraño. Pero es extraño, muy extraño.

Al cabo de unos instantes, el coronel ya había analizado las palabras de su esposa:

—¿«Más»? ¿Qué más podría ser?

—Pues podría significar que Maggie no es feliz, y que se consuela de su desdicha a su manera.

La señora Assingham, que lo había meditado todo, prosiguió:

—Sí, porque si Maggie fuera desdichada, tengo la seguridad de que ésta sería la solución que adoptaría. Pero ¿cómo va a ser desdichada, cuando, como también estoy convencida, es el centro de todo, y adora a su marido tanto o más que antes?

Estas palabras indujeron al coronel a meditar largamente. Por fin, preguntó:

—Entonces, si Maggie es tan feliz como dices, ¿qué diablos pasa? Al oírle su esposa casi se abalanza sobre él:

—En ese caso, ¿piensas que Maggie es desdichada y lo oculta?

El coronel levantó los brazos en actitud de rendición, diciendo:

—Querida, te los dejo a todos a tu disposición. No tengo nada más que decir.

—Esto no es muy amable por tu parte que digamos.

La señora Assingham había hablado ahora, como si el coronel acostumbrara a ser amable. Ella insistió:

—Has reconocido que era «extraño».

Y estas palabras tuvieron la virtud de que el coronel, por el momento, volviera a centrar su atención en un punto antes debatido:

—¿Se ha quejado Charlotte de no tener habitaciones para sus amigas?

—Que yo sepa, jamás. No, Charlotte no suele adoptar actitudes de esa clase. Y además, ¿a quién se puede quejar?

—¿No estás tú siempre a su disposición para eso?

Como si se tratara de un capítulo cerrado, exclamó, sorprendida:

—¡Oh, «yo»!

Luego, dijo:

—Para ser justa con Charlotte debo decir que de día en día me parece más y más extraordinaria.

La reiteración de esta última palabra provocó que en el rostro del coronel apareciera una expresión de matiz más profundo:

—Si todos y cada uno de ellos son tan extraordinarios, ¿no crees que lo mejor es lavarse las manos de sus asuntos y mantenerse al margen?

El rostro de la señora Assingham reaccionó ante esta pregunta como si sólo fuera el último resto de un tono anteriormente empleado y que ahora resultara improcedente debido a la gravedad que la situación había alcanzado. Su dura mirada revelaba el estado de sus nervios de manera que el coronel, siempre alerta, decidió retroceder a terrenos más seguros. Antes había hablado en este tono de hombre normal y corriente, pero ahora tenía que hacer algo más de lo que hacen los hombres normales y corrientes. El coronel dijo:

—¿Es que Charlotte no tiene a su marido…?

—¿Para quejarse? Prefiere morir a hacer semejante cosa.

—¡Oh…!

Ante la visión de tan extremas soluciones, la cara de Bob Assingham se alargó dócilmente:

—¿Y no tiene al Príncipe?

—¿Para esa clase de asuntos? El Príncipe no cuenta para eso.

—Pues yo pensaba que la causa y motivo de su agitación radicaba en que ésta es precisamente la función del Príncipe.

La señora Assingham tenía ya dispuesta su matizada defensa ante esta argumentación:

—No cuenta en absoluto como persona a la que dirigir quejas. El motivo de mi excitación consiste precisamente en que Charlotte bajo ningún pretexto será causa de aburrimiento del Príncipe. ¡Es incapaz!

Al imaginar la superioridad de la señora Verver, superioridad que le impedía cometer semejante error, la señora Assingham, con su expresión característica, levantó bruscamente la cabeza, a modo de tributo a la general discreción de aquella señora en toda circunstancia, tributo que el referido personaje sin duda alguna había recibido personalmente más de una vez. El coronel, después de emitir un bajo sonido parecido al de hacer gárgaras, dijo:

—¡Sólo Maggie aburre al Príncipe!

Pero su esposa también estaba preparada para eso:

—¡No, no sólo Maggie! Hay mucha gente en Londres, y no debemos sorprendernos, que aburre al Príncipe.

—En este caso resulta que Maggie sólo es la más pesada entre todos los que le aburren.

Pero el coronel inmediatamente renunció a contestar esta pregunta, debido a que le vino a las mientes otra pregunta cuya semilla había sembrado su cónyuge poco antes:

—Acabas de decir que el Príncipe seguramente habría regresado ya, en compañía de Charlotte, «caso de que hayan regresado». ¿Realmente consideras posible que no hayan regresado?

Expresó su interés de manera que no puso de manifiesto que, a su parecer, la señora Assingham tenía cierta responsabilidad en lo que pudiera ocurrir. Pero ella no estaba dispuesta evidentemente a asumir tal responsabilidad:

—Creo que nada hay que no sean capaces de hacer actualmente… en su intensa buena fe.

Bob repitió estas últimas palabras como un eco, aunque en un tono extrañamente crítico:

—¿Buena fe?

—En su falsa posición. Viene a ser lo mismo.

El tono firme y decidido con que la señora Assingham pronunciara estas palabras tuvo la virtud de superar la superficial falta de lógica de las mismas. Luego añadió:

—Según mi interpretación de su manera de ser, cabe muy bien la posibilidad de que no hayan regresado, para demostrar cómo son.

El coronel dio visibles muestras de preguntarse cuál era la interpretación que su cónyuge daba a la manera de ser de aquellos dos. Preguntó:

—¿Quieres decir que a lo mejor se han largado juntos a cualquier sitio?

—Quizá se hayan quedado en Matcham hasta mañana. Quizá hayan enviado, por separado, un telegrama a sus respectivos hogares, telegrama que habrá llegado después de que Maggie y yo nos separásemos…

Fanny Assingham meditó y dijo:

—Quizá… ¡Sólo Dios sabe lo que pueden haber hecho!

De repente prosiguió, con más emoción, emoción que expresó en un gimiente tono de desdicha mal reprimida, sometida a la presión de un resorte del panorama que divisaba Fanny:

Y sea lo que sea lo que hayan hecho, jamás lo sabré. Jamás, jamás… porque no quiero saberlo, y porque nada me inducirá a saberlo. En consecuencia, que hagan lo que quieran. Sin embargo, ¡yo me he preocupado por todos ellos!

Expresó estas últimas palabras con otro irremediable estremecimiento, y al momento brotaron de sus ojos las lágrimas, aun cuando al producirse el llanto se apartó de su marido, para que no fuera testigo. Penetró en el salón en penumbra, en el que el coronel, en el curso de su inspección llevada a efecto poco antes, había descorrido un poco la cortina, por lo que entraba por la ventana algo de luz de los faroles callejeros. Fanny Assingham se acercó a esa ventana y en ella apoyó la frente, mientras el coronel, con la cara larga, la observaba dubitativo. Quizá se preguntara qué había hecho realmente su esposa y hasta qué punto podía haberse comprometido en los asuntos de aquella gente sin que él lo supiera ni pudiera imaginarlo. Pero el hecho de oírla llorar, en contra de su voluntad, y verla intentar dominar el llanto fue, de repente, demasiado para él. En otras ocasiones había visto a su mujer en el trance de no reprimir en modo alguno las lágrimas y ello había afectado muchísimo menos al coronel. Se acercó a su esposa, y le rodeó el cuerpo con el brazo, atrajo su cabeza sobre su pecho y ella, entrecortado el aliento, la dejó reposar unos instantes, con una paciencia que ahora produciría el efecto de serenarla. Sin embargo, y aunque sea raro, el efecto de esta crisis no fue dar término al coloquio con la natural consecuencia de mandarlos a los dos a la cama, sino que, contrariamente, el asunto que los había tenido ocupados hasta el momento quedó más al descubierto por la brusca manifestación que Fanny Assingham hizo de sus sentimientos, es decir, habían dado un gran paso adelante, habiendo penetrado, y valga la expresión, sin decirse más palabras, en la zona de lo que les interesaba, cerrando la puerta después de entrar y quedando los dos más claramente cara a cara con el problema. Permanecieron los dos durante unos minutos contemplando el problema a través de la oscura ventana que se abría al mundo de las humanas desdichas en general, cuya vaga luz jugueteaba aquí y allá, sobre dorados, cristales y colores, sobre los floridos adornos perceptibles en la penumbra del salón de Fanny Assingham. Y el encanto que hubo entre los dos pasó con el gemido de dolor de Fanny, con su estallido de llanto, con la desorientación de Bob Assingham, con su amabilidad y su consuelo, con los

momentos de silencio de ambos; silencio que bien hubiera podido representar el hundimiento de uno y otra juntos, cogidos de la mano y durante cierto tiempo, en el místico lago en el que al principio, tal como hemos dicho, el coronel había visto a su esposa remando sola, de cuya belleza ahora podían hablar mejor que antes debido a que el motivo, por fin y de una vez para siempre, había quedado definido. ¿Y cuál era el motivo, que Fanny había revelado a las claras, sino que era preciso salvar a Charlotte y al Príncipe, en la medida en que hablar coherentemente de ellos pudiera salvarlos? Realmente, de una manera y otra quedaron salvados en la preocupada mente de la señora Assingham, ya que así es la mente de las mujeres. El coronel comunicó a su cónyuge, por el medio de no denegarle su ternura, que había comprendido en medida suficiente la insinuación, y que no necesitaba más que dicha sugerencia. Esto quedó muy claramente establecido, incluso cuando el coronel volvió a abordar el tema suscitado por su esposa cuando ella le habló de su reciente entrevista con Maggie:

—Bueno, la verdad es que no sé qué deduces de ello o por qué has de deducir algo.

El coronel pronunció estas palabras como si estuviera en plena posesión de lo que los dos habían extraído de las profundidades.

Capítulo XXIV

Estas palabras motivaron que la señora Assingham contestara:

—Sólo puedo decir que en la cara de Maggie, en su voz y en todo su comportamiento había algo que me afectó como jamás Maggie me había afectado, y fue debido precisamente, y sobre todo, a que me di cuenta de que Maggie hacía todo lo que podía, y todo lo que la pobrecilla puede es mucho, para portarse de manera tranquila y natural. Cuando una ve a gente que siempre es natural hacer pálidos, patéticos y titubeantes esfuerzos para portarse con naturalidad, entonces es cuando una comprende que algo pasa. No puedo describir la impresión que he recibido. También tú la hubieras recibido. Y lo único que puede representar un problema para Maggie es esto. Yal decir «esto» quiero decir que Maggie comienza a dudar.

Guardó silencio y, después, concluyó:

—Comienza a dudar por primera vez de su maravilloso buen juicio, pobrecilla, y de su pequeño y maravilloso mundo.

La visión de Fanny era impresionante; el coronel, como si también él se sintiera conmovido, decidió efectuar otra salida en misión de exploración:

—¡Duda de la felicidad! ¡Duda de la amistad! ¡Pobre! ¡Será muy duro para ella!

El coronel concluyó:

—Pero recurrirá a Charlotte.

La señora Assingham, todavía sombríamente meditativa, negó con un movimiento de cabeza la afirmación de su marido:

—No recurrirá a nadie. No hará ninguna de esas cosas que cualquier otra persona haría. Cargará con todo ella sola.

—¿Quieres decir que se atribuirá la culpa de todo?

—Sí, siempre y cuando encuentre los medios para hacerlo.

El coronel, cumpliendo cortésmente con su deber, declaró:

—En este caso, Maggie es una personita con gran entereza.

—De una manera u otra, tendrás ocasión de comprobar hasta qué punto lo es.

De repente, Fanny habló con creciente entusiasmo, de modo que se volvió hacia el coronel como si se diera inmediata cuenta de su sorpresa:

—¡Y me redimirá!

—¿Que te redimirá, dices?

Ahora, Fanny habló en tonos todavía más exaltados:

—¡Sí, a mí! Soy la peor. Yo lo hice todo. Lo reconozco y lo acepto. Pero Maggie no me echará la culpa, Maggie no me atribuirá nada. En consecuencia, a ella recurriré, y ella me levantará.

Hablaba casi igual que si lo hiciera sin pensar, de manera que la brusca vivacidad de sus palabras había dejado suspenso al coronel. Siguió:

—Maggie llevará sobre sus hombros el peso de todos nosotros.

A pesar de todo todavía había interrogantes en las palabras del coronel, cuando dijo:

—¿Quieres decir que no se quejará? Me parece maravilloso por su parte.

A continuación, y mirando no sin ternura a su esposa, preguntó:

—En este caso, ¿dónde están las dificultades?

Con el mismo profundo énfasis, Fanny declaró:

—¡Es que no las hay!

El coronel, habiendo perdido de nuevo toda lógica, miró largamente a su esposa antes de exclamar:

—¡Claro, quieres decir que no hay dificultades en lo que a nosotros se refiere!

La señora Assingham sostuvo durante un minuto la mirada de su marido, como si le reprochara un poco haberse excedido en su egoísmo o, de todos modos, en su preocupación por el superficial prestigio de los dos. Luego pareció que estimara que, a fin de cuentas, su superficial prestigio era lo que más importancia tenía y, con gran dignidad, dijo:

—No, si sabemos mantener la cabeza debidamente alta.

Por su manera de hablar, parecía querer decir que debían comenzar en aquel mismo instante a mantener la cabeza alta. Pero este comportamiento debía tener su base debidamente declarada:

—¿Recuerdas lo que dijiste aquella noche en que realmente me sentí preocupada por primera vez? ¿Después de la recepción en el Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores? ¿En el coche, al regresar a casa?

Sí, el coronel lo recordaba:

—¿Que les dejáramos que se las arreglaran solos?

—Exactamente. En realidad, viniste a decir: «Puedes tener la seguridad de que gracias a su ingenio mantendrán las debidas apariencias». Pues en ello he depositado mi confianza. He dejado que se las arreglen solos.

El coronel, dubitativo, preguntó:

—¿Y ahora crees que no saben hacerlo?

—Les he dejado, pero ahora veo el modo en que los he dejado y el lugar en que les he dejado. Sin saberlo, los he dejado en todo momento a disposición de ella.

—¿De la Princesa?

Pensativa, la señora Assingham prosiguió, no sin contestar a su marido:

—Esto es lo que quería decir. Esto es lo que me ha ocurrido en mi entrevista de hoy con ella. Me he dado cuenta de que esto es lo que he estado haciendo.

—Ya veo.

—No tenía por qué atormentarme. Maggie se ha hecho cargo de ellos.

Ante estas palabras, el coronel declaró que sí, que lo «veía», sin embargo causaba la impresión de estar muy mal de la vista. Preguntó:

—Pero ¿qué le ha ocurrido a ella con el paso del tiempo? ¿Qué es lo que le ha abierto los ojos?

—Jamás tuvo los ojos cerrados. Le echa de menos a él.

—¿Y por qué no le ha echado de menos antes?

Pues sí, dando frente a su marido, allí, entre las domésticas penumbras y destellos, Fanny consiguió hallar la explicación:

—Le echaba de menos, pero no quería enterarse. Tenía sus razones, pero quería estar ciega. Ahora, por fin, la situación se ha aclarado. Ahora, lo sabe. Ha sido revelador.

La señora Assingham coronó sus palabras con la siguiente afirmación:

—Y también para mí ha sido revelador.

Su marido la había escuchado atentamente; por el momento, el efecto de su atención sólo fue, de nuevo, una muy vaga comprensión; el refugio de esta vaguedad fue un suspiro y una exclamación:

—¡Pobrecita…!

—¡No, no la compadezcas!

Estas palabras tuvieron la virtud de sacarle un poco de su desorientación. Preguntó:

—¿No podemos apiadarnos de ella?

Ahora no, por lo menos aún no. Es pronto todavía, a no ser que sea demasiado tarde.

La señora Assingham meditó y dijo:

—Esto depende, y en su debido momento lo veremos. Bien hubiéramos podido apiadarnos de ella anteriormente, a pesar de que de nada le hubiera servido; sí, hubiéramos podido comenzar a apiadarnos de ella hace ya tiempo. Sin embargo, ahora ha comenzado a vivir. Tal como yo lo veo, tal como yo lo veo…

Pero la visión de la señora Assingham se perdió en la lejanía.

—¡Tal como tú lo ves, a la Princesa no le gustará que nos apiademos de ella!

—Lo que yo veo es que vivirá. Veo que triunfará.

Había pronunciado estas palabras con tan brusco tono profético, que tuvieron la virtud de alegrar a su marido, quien dijo:

—¡Pues en ese caso debemos ayudarla!

—No, no podemos ni siquiera acercarnos a ella. Debemos dejarlos a todos en paz. Debemos mantener las manos quietas y caminar de puntillas. Debemos limitarnos a ver y esperar. Entretanto, debemos capear el temporal como mejor podamos. Éste es el lugar en que nos encontramos. Nos lo hemos ganado. Somos espectadores.

Poniéndose a pasear por la estancia, como si hubiera entrado en comunicación con oscuros pensamientos, guardó silencio, hasta que su marido le preguntó:

—¿Espectadores de qué?

—Pues de algo que posiblemente será hermoso. Hermoso, si es que ocurre.

La señora Assingham se detuvo ante su marido, y éste le preguntó:

—¿Quieres decir que recuperará al Príncipe?

Realizando un rápido movimiento de impaciencia, levantó la mano. Parecía que la pregunta del coronel fuera incluso sórdida:

—No se trata de un asunto de recuperación. No será una cuestión de vulgar lucha. Para «recuperar» al Príncipe es preciso que lo haya perdido y, para perderlo, es preciso que antes lo haya tenido.

Fanny comentó sus propias palabras con un negativo movimiento de cabeza, y dijo:

—Cuando digo que Maggie estaba despertando quiero decir que despertaba a la verdad de que en realidad no ha tenido jamás al Príncipe. Jamás.

El pobre coronel exclamó jadeante:

—¡Oh, Dios!

Su esposa repitió:

—¡Jamás!

Y prosiguió, sin piedad:

—¿Recuerdas lo que dije, a su debido momento, hace ya tanto tiempo, aquella noche, poco antes de que se casaran, el día que Charlotte apareció tan de repente?

Mucho tememos que la sonrisa con la que el coronel recibió esta pregunta no fue, precisamente, firme. Observó:

—¿Y qué no has dicho, querida, a su debido momento?

—Muchas cosas, sin duda, que en más de una ocasión quizá hayan sido la verdad. Sin embargo, jamás he vuelto a decir lo que te dije aquella noche, en el sentido de que Maggie era la última persona en el mundo a la que se podía informar de una cosa mala. Parecía que su imaginación estuviera totalmente cerrada a la maldad, y su percepción sellada ante ella.

Calló unos instantes y luego añadió:

—Y ahora es lo que forzosamente ocurrirá. Su percepción tendrá que abrirse.

El coronel hizo un movimiento afirmativo con la cabeza:

—Comprendo. Se abrirá al mal.

El coronel volvió a afirmar con la cabeza, casi alegremente, igual que si quisiera tener la fiesta en paz con un niño, y dijo:

—Se abrirá a la percepción de lo malo, malo, muy malo.

Pero el espíritu de su cónyuge, después de sus esfuerzos para remontar el vuelo hasta grandes alturas, supo mantenerse en lo alto:

—A lo que se llama el Mal, con eme mayúscula, por primera vez en su vida. Al conocimiento del mal, al descubrimiento del mal, a la cruda presencia del mal.

Para no quedar corta, dio la más amplia medida del mal:

—A la cruel y pasmosa herida del mal, a la cotidiana sensación del helado aliento del mal…

En este punto, reparó en un límite.

—A no ser… a no ser… que, a pesar del largo camino recorrido, se detenga y no recorra más, y se quede sencillamente en el umbral de la sospecha y del temor. En fin, ya veremos si esta dosis de alarma resulta suficiente.

El coronel arguyó:

—¿Suficiente para qué, querida, como no sea para dejarla con el corazón roto?

La extraña respuesta de la señora Assingham fue:

—¡Suficiente para darle una buena sacudida! Quiero decir la sacudida que necesita. Y esta sacudida no va a partirle el corazón.

Acto seguido, la señora Assingham explicó:

—Esta sacudida… bueno, pues sí, esta sacudida la obligará, por una vez en la vida, a comprender un par de verdades.

Él preguntó:

—Pero ¿no es una verdadera lástima que estas verdades sean precisamente las más desagradables para ella?

—¿«Desagradables»? Forzosamente han de ser desagradables si queremos que se entere del lugar en que se encuentra. Han de ser desagradables, a fin de que yerga un poco la espalda. Han de ser desagradables para que la induzcan a tomar la decisión de vivir.

Bob Assingham estaba ahora junto a la ventana, mientras su cónyuge paseaba lentamente por la estancia. El coronel había encendido un cigarrillo con el fin de poder conservar la paciencia hasta el final, y causaba la impresión de «cronometrar» vagamente a su esposa, mientras ésta iba y venía. Al mismo tiempo se sentía obligado a rendir tributo a la lucidez que su esposa había alcanzado en los últimos instantes, y fue sin duda para expresar la capacidad docente que en ella reconocía por lo que permitió que sus ojos se alzaran, como impulsados por la fuerza de sus sentimientos, y que su vista vagara por la penumbra de la parte alta de la estancia. El coronel había pensado el comentario que las palabras de su esposa lógicamente comportaban:

—Sí, sí, la decisión de vivir, por el bien de su hijo.

—¡Qué hijo, ni qué niño muerto!

Jamás se sintió tan chasqueado como en el momento en que su esposa se detuvo para aclarar de semejante manera sus ideas. Fanny Assingham prosiguió:

—¡Para vivir, pobre muchacha, para el bien de su padre, que es harina de otro costal!

Y la grácil y adornada persona de la señora Assingham irradió, al decir estas palabras, la luz de la verdad que había comenzado a resplandecer después de tanta búsqueda. Aseguró:

—¡Cualquier imbécil puede cuidar del niño! Maggie tendrá un motivo más original, y veremos qué efectos le causa. Tendrá que salvarle a él.

—¿A él?

—Sí, tendrá que evitar que su padre llegue a saber lo que ella sabe. Y esto… esto…

Calló. Parecía verlo allí, ante ella, y también bajo la mismísima mirada de su marido. Siguió:

—Esto no será coser y cantar, ni mucho menos.

Después de lo cual, como si hubiera llegado a la más alta cima posible, Fanny Assingham dio por terminada la conversación:

—¡Buenas noches!

Sin embargo, algo hubo en el comportamiento de Fanny Assingham o, por lo menos, en el efecto que esta suprema manifestación produjo que tuvo la virtud de atraer de golpe al coronel al lado de su esposa, por lo que, después de que ésta le hubiera dado la espalda para cruzar la salita ante el salón y llegar a la escalera, el coronel la alcanzó y le habló en tono excitado, antes de que pisara el primer peldaño:

—¡Oye, esto será realmente divertido!

Fanny Assingham volvióse hacia su marido y, quieta al pie de la escalera, dijo:

—¿Divertido?

—Bueno, quiero decir que tendrá su encanto.

—¿Encanto?

En cierta medida, la ley que regía el comportamiento de aquellos dos imponía que Fanny se portara trágicamente, cuando el coronel estaba de buen humor. Éste dijo:

—Quiero decir que será hermoso. Bueno, tú misma has dicho que sería hermoso.

Después de una brevísima pausa el coronel prosiguió, llevado por el ímpetu de esta idea, como si con ella hubieran quedado aclaradas divergencias que hasta el momento habían sido un tanto oscuras:

—Ocurre que no comprendo cómo es posible que la preocupación que su padre inspira en Maggie, preocupación que la ha llevado a tales extremos que me ha inducido a calificarla de «extraña», no haya sido la causa, al mismo tiempo, de que ella no se diera cuenta de lo que estaba pasando.

—¡Exactamente! Ésta es la pregunta que me he estado formulando en todo momento.

La señora Assingham dijo estas palabras con la vista fija en la alfombra, pero la alzó para decir a su

marido con suma franqueza:

—Y es una pregunta propia de un imbécil.

—¿Un imbécil?

—Es una pregunta que hubiera formulado esa imbécil que he sido, en tantos aspectos, y tan a menudo, en los últimos tiempos. Tú tienes disculpa, puesto que la formulas ahora. Pero hoy puedo decir que he tenido delante de mis narices constantemente la contestación a esta pregunta.

—¿Y cuál es?

—Pues la contestación se encuentra en la mucha preocupación que siente por su padre, en la pasión que pone en su piedad filial esa valerosa muchachita.

La señora Assingham aclaró sus propias palabras:

—Así ha sido, y reconozco que es todo lo «extraño» que quepa imaginar. Ahora bien, también es cierto que el principio de esta preocupación también fue «extraño». Fue «extraño» desde el momento en que nuestro querido amigo contrajo matrimonio para tranquilizar la conciencia de su hija y, entonces, en perversa paradoja, resultó que el matrimonio de nuestro amigo produjo unos efectos exactamente contrarios a los deseados.

Sin embargo, ante la renovada visión de esta fatalidad, sólo pudo encoger los hombros con expresión desesperada.

Comprensivo, el coronel musitó:

—Ya veo. Fue un principio «extraño».

Pero las palabras del coronel tuvieron la virtud de inducir a su esposa a considerar que su posición era intolerable. Levantó los brazos y declaró:

—¡Sí, así me encuentro yo ahora! Yo estuve detrás de todo. No sé qué me poseyó, pero lo cierto es que empujé a nuestro amigo a contraer matrimonio, planeé su matrimonio…

Pero al momento recuperaba el dominio de sí misma, diciendo:

—Bueno, sí. En realidad sé lo que me poseyó. Sí, ¿acaso el pobre hombre no estaba constantemente acosado por ansiosas mujeres y, de manera absolutamente patética, no pedía protección y, acaso, no le expresaba a una, con verdadero encanto, lo mucho que necesitaba y deseaba esa protección?

Con perfecta lógica, continuó:

—Maggie, con una nueva vida propia no podía, en el futuro, entregarse a hacer en beneficio de su padre todo lo que había hecho en el pasado, ni protegerle, ni tenerle a salvo de esas mujeres, conteniéndolas. Yo lo percibía, gracias a mi gran afecto y comprensión.

Todo volvió felizmente a su memoria por centésima vez, aun cuando en parte oscurecido por la ansiedad y la compunción:

—Y una se portó, sin la menor duda, como una insensata entrometida, sí porque una siempre es entrometida al pensar que comprende la vida de los demás mucho mejor de lo que ellos mismo la comprenden.

La señora Assingham meditó. Y, luego, insistió:

—Pero la excusa que una tiene, en el presente caso, es que esa gente no veía por sí misma, realmente no veía nada. Y, con lástima, me percaté de que esa gente estaba estropeando lamentablemente el maravilloso material que tenía a su disposición, que lo desperdiciaba, lo dejaba escapar de sus manos. Esa gente no sabía vivir y, como es natural, una no podía, caso de que les quisiera un poco, ser testigo de lo anterior y quedarse con los brazos cruzados.

Y la pobre mujer, coincidiendo en estos instantes en una comunión con la inteligencia de su marido más íntima que en cualquier otro momento, a su parecer, le traspasó toda la carga que llevaba en la conciencia:

—Tarde o temprano siempre pago las consecuencias del innecesario y condenable interés social que siento por los demás. Y, desde luego, únicamente me faltaba fijar mi interés en Charlotte; Charlotte estaba aquí presente en la linde de nuestras vidas, adentrándose en ellas, revoloteando, a veces bella y misteriosamente, y su vida estaba a punto de desperdiciarse y malograrse, de la misma manera que para la sociedad el señor Verver y Maggie también se malograban. Y comencé a pensar durante mis horas de insomnio que Charlotte era la persona que podía tener a raya a aquellas ansiosas mujeres, sin ser ella ansiosa a la vulgar manera de las otras, y que este servicio de Charlotte al señor Verver sería la dulce tarea de su futuro. Algo había, desde luego, que habría podido detenerme.

Casi gimiendo, aclaró:

—¡Ya sabes a qué me refiero, sí, lo sabes porque lo veo reflejado en tu cara! Pero lo único que puedo

decir es que este algo no me detuvo. En gran parte la razón por la que no me contuve, tan pronto me hube enamorado de la bella simetría de mis planes, fue que tenía la seguridad de que Maggie aceptaría a Charlotte, en tanto yo no sabía qué otra mujer, qué otra clase de mujer, podría aceptar Maggie. Veo, veo…

La señora Assingham hizo una pausa, durante la cual no dejó de sostener la atenta mirada de su marido a la escucha, y la fiebre de la rememoración había subido tanto, al compás de su relato, que se veía a las claras el deseo de que él debía acogerla a su lado, aun cuando con un aliento que la refrescara un poco. El coronel Assingham dijo:

—Lo comprendo perfectamente, querida.

Sin embargo, estas palabras la dejaron tan sombría como antes.

—Como es natural veo, querido, lo que comprendes. Sí, ya que, una vez más, se manifiesta claramente en tus ojos. Ves que yo vi que Maggie, en su insuperable ignorancia, aceptaría a Charlotte.

La tristeza de su sordidez se apoderó de nuevo de ella, quien siguió diciendo:

—Sí, querido, no hace falta que me digas que aquel conocimiento fue la razón de que yo hiciera lo que hice. Cuando tú me dices esto, ¿qué puedo hacer para tolerarlo?

En inefable movimiento, meneó la cabeza para añadir:

—Estoy hundida, hundida, hundida.

Pero rápidamente matizó estas palabras:

—Pero hay una cosa, una cosa pequeña, que puede contribuir a salvar mi vida.

Hizo esperar un instante al coronel, y dijo:

—Fácilmente, y quizá con toda certidumbre, hubieran podido portarse peor.

El coronel, después de pensar, preguntó:

—¿Peor que Charlotte?

La señora Assingham gritó:

—¡Ah, no me digas que no pudo haber cosa peor! Hubieran podido portarse de muchas maneras en su situación. A su manera, Charlotte es extraordinaria.

El coronel se mostró de acuerdo casi simultáneamente:

—Extraordinaria.

Fanny Assingham afirmó:

—Mantiene las apariencias.

Dubitativo, el coronel preguntó:

—¿Con el Príncipe?

—Para el Príncipe. Y con los otros. Con el señor Verver las mantiene maravillosamente. Pero, sobre todo, con Maggie.

Dispuesta a ser justa con todo, decidió serlo asimismo con las apariencias, y advirtió:

—Y las apariencias representan dos tercios del comportamiento. Imagínalo que hubiera ocurrido si el señor Verver se hubiera casado con una mujer que hubiera hecho trizas las apariencias.

El coronel se horrorizó:

—¡Ah, querida, no quiero ni pensarlo!

A pesar de ello, la señora Assingham prosiguió:

—Imagina lo que hubiera pasado si el señor Verver se hubiera casado con una mujer que hubiera interesado de veras al Príncipe.

—¿Quieres decir que Charlotte no le interesa al Príncipe?

Éste era otro punto de vista que bien merecía atención, y el coronel, evidentemente, deseaba que su mujer se diera cuenta de la necesidad de hacer un esfuerzo para aclararlo. El coronel mantenía la vista fija en su cónyuge, quien dejó pasar unos momentos antes de contestar:

—¡No!

—En ese caso, ¿qué juego se traen esos dos?

De nuevo ella guardó silencio, por lo que el coronel, con las manos en los bolsillos, tuvo oportunidad de arriesgarse allí en pie ante ella, en tono tranquilizador, a formular otra pregunta:

—Y estas «apariencias» de las que has hablado, que son las dos terceras partes del comportamiento, ¿impedirán a Charlotte ahora, según tu hipótesis, regresar a casa en compañía del Príncipe hasta mañana por la mañana?

—Sí, en absoluto. Sus apariencias.

—¿Sus, de quién?

—Las de Maggie y el señor Verver, esas apariencias que ellos imponen a Charlotte y el Príncipe.

La señora Assingham explicó:

—Esas apariencias que tan paradójicamente, como he dicho, han conseguido imponerse como correctas.

El coronel meditó, pero en esta ocasión la meditación sólo le sirvió para volver a caer en un estado de confusión:

—Esa paradoja de la que tú hablas, querida, es precisamente lo que no comprendo. La actual situación no se ha producido de la noche a la mañana, así tal como aparecen las setas. Sea cual fuere la situación en que se encuentran, esta situación es consecuencia de sus actos. ¿O acaso son otras impotentes víctimas más del destino?

Pues sí, por fin, Fanny tuvo la valentía de decirlo:

—Sí, lo son. Ser tan abyectamente inocente es ser víctima del destino.

—¿Y Charlotte y el Príncipe son abyectamente inocentes?

Fanny volvió a pensar un poco antes de contestar; cuando lo hizo, se puso plenamente a la altura de las circunstancias.

—Sí. Mejor dicho, lo eran y, a su manera, tanto como los otros. En el ánimo de todos dominaban las buenas intenciones. El Príncipe y Charlotte eran hermosos. Yen esto deposité mi fe. Verdaderamente lo eran, y no me cabe la menor duda.

Fanny Assingham añadió:

—De lo contrario, yo hubiera sido perversa. Y no lo he sido. Sólo he sido tonta de remate.

El coronel preguntó:

—En este caso, nuestra confusión ¿qué los obligó a ser?

—Pues los llevó a tener excesiva consideración para con cada uno de los otros. Y a este error puedes darle el nombre que quieras, pero de todos modos éste es su caso.

Con gravedad, aclaró:

—Es un ejemplo de aquello a lo que conduce estar dotado de exceso, un verdadero exceso, de encanto.

Hallar la ilación de esta afirmación requería cierto esfuerzo, pero el coronel hizo cuanto pudo:

—Sí, de acuerdo, pero ¿para con quién?, ¿no crees que todo depende de esto? ¿Para con quién el Príncipe y Charlotte han sido excesivamente encantadores?

—En primer lugar, evidentemente, cada uno para con el otro. Y, luego, los dos juntos para con Maggie.

Intrigado, el coronel repitió:

—¿Para con Maggie?

Ahora, la señora Assingham habló con cristalina claridad:

—Para con Maggie. Al aceptar de una forma tan inocente, tan inocente, los dos, la inocente idea de Maggie al pensar que todavía tenía a su padre firmemente incorporado a su vida.

—Pero ¿no se considera, de acuerdo con las normales y corrientes reglas de humanidad, y si uno no se ha peleado con él, y si uno tiene los medios precisos para ello, y él por su parte no se emborracha ni arma broncas, no se considera, pues, que uno está obligado a tener acogido junto a sí a un padre viejo?

—Ciertamente, siempre y cuando no concurran razones específicas para no hacerlo. Sí, ya que la posibilidad de que haya otras razones que no consistan en emborracharse es exactamente lo que debemos tener en consideración. Y, ante todo, hay que tener en cuenta que el señor Verver no es viejo.

El coronel hizo un alto el fuego. Pero, al final, volvió a la carga:

—En este caso, ¿por qué diablos el pobre hombre se porta como si lo fuese?

Fanny tardó un poco en hallar respuesta a esta pregunta. Pero la halló:

—¿Y cómo sabes tú cómo se porta?

—Oye, querida, ¡que todos vemos cómo se porta Charlotte!

Una vez más, la señora Assingham se tambaleó. Pero de nuevo recuperó el equilibrio:

—¿Acaso lo único que intento dejar sentado no es que el señor Verver se comporta de una manera encantadora para con Charlotte?

—¿No crees que eso depende mucho de lo que Charlotte entienda por «manera encantadora»?

La señora Assingham consideró la pregunta como si se tratara de una ligereza impertinente; luego, con un movimiento de cabeza rebosante de dignidad, decidió olvidarse de ella y dijo:

—El realmente joven es el señor Verver; la realmente vieja es Charlotte. Además, esto no altera lo que estaba diciendo.

El coronel, dando justo trato a su cónyuge, dijo:

—Estabas diciendo que todos son inocentes.

—Lo eran. Al principio, todos era inocentes de una forma extraordinaria. Y esto es lo que quiero decir cuando me refiero a su incapacidad para ver que cuanto más daban por supuesto que podían vivir unidos, en realidad más separados vivían. Y repito que creo con sinceridad que el Príncipe y Charlotte decidieron honradamente, al principio, que les salvaría el afecto que sentían por el señor Verver, afecto que era serio, como merecía ser.

Inclinándose ante el razonamiento de su esposa, el coronel dijo:

—Comprendo. Y le salvaría a él.

—Es exactamente lo mismo.

—Y salvaría a Maggie.

En este punto, la señora Assingham no se mostró de acuerdo:

—Eso ya es un poco diferente. Sí, porque Maggie es quien más ha hecho.

Después de meditar, el coronel preguntó:

—¿A qué le llamas más?

—A lo que hizo al principio. Ella fue quien comenzó el círculo vicioso. Sí. Aunque levantes las cejas por el hecho de que haya asociado a Maggie con el vicio, eso precisamente es lo que hizo. Su recíproca consideración, vista globalmente, es lo que ha creado este abismo sin fondo; si realmente han quedado confusas relaciones entre ellos, se debe a que, a su manera, han sido increíblemente buenos.

Con una triste sonrisa, el coronel reconoció:

—¡Sí, a su manera!

—Que era, sobre todo, a la manera de Maggie.

Ahora las dialécticas punzadas que su marido le dirigía importaban un pimiento a la señora Assingham, quien prosiguió:

—En primer lugar, Maggie tenía que compensar a su padre por haberle dejado solo al estar tan intensamente unida en matrimonio como ella, la pobrecilla, imaginaba. Luego, tuvo que compensar a su marido por pasar tanto tiempo en compañía de su padre, a fin de que la reparación ofrecida a éste fuera perfecta; de lo contrario, ese tiempo hubiera podido pasarlo con su marido. Y su manera de hacerlo consistió precisamente en permitir al Príncipe el uso, el goce, o como quieras llamarlo, de Charlotte para alegrar su vida a plazos, y valga la expresión, en la misma medida en que el Príncipe la echara de menos a ella, a Maggie, dedicada al bienestar de su padre.

La señora Assingham, después de pensar un poco, siguió explicando:

—Sin embargo, en la misma medida en que para este propósito Maggie apartaba del lado del señor Verver a su joven madre política, estimaba que debía ofrecer una compensación. Como comprenderás fácilmente, esto echó sobre los hombros de Maggie una nueva obligación para con su padre, obligación creada y agravada por el desdichado, aunque heroico, sentido de justicia de Maggie. Ésta comenzó por intentar demostrar a su padre que su matrimonio jamás podría llegar a convertirse en un pretexto para abandonarle o para olvidarse de él, cualesquiera que fueran las tentaciones que le ofreciera su dicha con el Príncipe. A su vez, esto comportaba el que Maggie quisiera demostrar a su esposo que ella reconocía que aquel deseo, el deseo de seguir siendo intensamente la hija apasionada que siempre había sido, comportaba el que se apartara del Príncipe por el momento y en cierta medida, valga la expresión.

Hizo un largo paréntesis y luego prosiguió:

—Estoy plenamente de acuerdo en que una persona sólo puede tener una pasión, y me refiero a una pasión tierna al mismo tiempo. Pero esto no es aplicable a nuestros afectos primarios e instintivos, a la «voz de la sangre», como, por ejemplo, el amor hacia el padre o hacia un hermano. Estos afectos pueden ser intensos sin que impidan otras intensidades, tal como reconocerás, querido, si recuerdas que seguí adorando *tout bêtemene* a mi madre, a quien tú no adorabas en modo alguno, hasta muchos años después de que comenzara a adorarte a ti.

La señora Assingham volvió ahora al asunto principal:

—Pues bien, Maggie se encuentra en la misma situación en que yo me encontraba, con la añadidura de unas complicaciones de las que yo, a Dios gracias, estaba exenta, pero con el agravante de no tener conocimiento de lo que son las complicaciones que yo ya tenía desde un principio, por razones obvias. De todas maneras, el caso es que Maggie, antes de darse cuenta, había conseguido con sus pequeños escrúpulos y sus pequeñas clarividencias, que en realidad eran maravillosamente ciegas, unir a los otros dos de una manera que ni su más grosero comportamiento lo hubiera conseguido. Ahora Maggie sabe que algo ha

ocurrido, aunque hasta el momento ignora qué. La pobre chiquilla no ha hecho más que incrementar más y más la dosis de su remedio, de algo que ha estimado ansiosa pero confusamente como el comportamiento necesario, y ha incrementado su remedio, ha incrementado su comportamiento, averiguando por sí misma desde el principio qué remedio y comportamiento habría sido preciso modificar en gran manera. La única modificación de Maggie ha consistido en evitar que su padre se pregunte si acaso todo lo que hay en su vida en común ha de redundar siempre en bien de todos. Ahora está más obligada que en cualquier momento anterior a evitar que su padre tenga conciencia de que en la situación de todos (una situación un poco peculiar, a poco que se fije en ello) hay algo incómodo o desagradable y, mucho menos, moralmente reprobable. Ella tiene que estar día tras día, mes tras mes, retocando constantemente la situación a fin de que parezca natural y normal a su padre. De modo y manera, y que Dios me perdone semejante comparación, que es como una vieja que se pinta y que cada día tiene que pintarse más y llevar la pintura con más audacia, incluso con más descaro, a medida que envejece.

Fanny quedó unos instantes en embelesado silencio ante la imagen que se le había ocurrido. Dijo:

—Me gusta la idea de una Maggie audaz y descarada, de una Maggie aprendiendo a serlo para dorar la píldora. Podría aprender a serlo; creo que aprenderá a serlo, consumada y diabólicamente, con aquel sagrado fin. Sí, en el momento en que el pobre hombre comience a ver, lo verá todo rojo…

Luego guardó silencio para contemplar la imagen por ella forjada. Incluso Bob comprendió esta imagen. Ahora éste preguntó:

—¿Yen ese momento comenzará el jaleo?

Como Fanny le dirigió una dura mirada, modificó su pregunta:

—¿Quieres decir que, si ocurre lo que has dicho, nuestra encantadora muchachita quedará perdida?

Fanny guardó silencio unos instantes más antes de contestar:

—Tal como te he dicho anteriormente, Maggie no quedará perdida si su padre se salva. Para ella, esto será suficiente salvación. El coronel lo comprendió:

—En ese caso, es una heroína.

—Ciertamente toda una heroína.

Pero la señora Assingham añadió:

—Sin embargo, es la inocencia de él lo que los salvará.

El cónyuge de la señora Assingham volvió a centrar su atención en la inocencia del señor Verver, y dijo:

—¡Qué extraño es todo!

—¡Claro que es extraño! Es terriblemente extraño que el carácter tremendamente extraño de estos dos, extraño a nuestra antigua y querida manera de ser extraños, con lo cual no me refiero a lo extraños que podamos ser tú y yo, sino a lo extraños que son mis queridos compatriotas, de quienes tan deplorablemente me he diferenciado por denegación, fuera precisamente lo que llamara la atención y despertara mi interés por ellos.

Fanny Assingham, no sin pesar, añadió:

—Desde luego, llegarán a parecerme todavía más extraños antes de que hayan acabado conmigo.

Sí, cabía muy bien esta posibilidad, pero no era esto lo que principalmente preocupaba al coronel:

—¿Y sigues creyendo en la inocencia del señor Verver, después de dos años con Charlotte?

Mirando fijamente a su marido, Fanny Assingham repuso:

—Pero es que el punto más importante radica en que el señor Verver no ha tenido dos años con Charlotte, es decir lo que pudiéramos llamar dos años no compartidos.

—¿De la misma manera que Maggie, según tu teoría, no ha tenido cuatro años «sin compartir» con el Príncipe?

Sin esperar contestación a su pregunta, el coronel concluyó:

—Hace falta considerar todo lo que Maggie no ha tenido para comprender esa inocencia que tanto nos admira.

La señora Assingham pasó por alto cuantos matices irónicos pudiera haber en las palabras de su marido, y dijo:

—Hace falta tener en consideración muchas cosas para explicar cómo es Maggie. De todas maneras, lo que queda claro, a pesar de que parezca raro, es que todo lo que ha hecho en beneficio de su padre ha sido eficaz, hasta el momento, en medida suficiente. Ha conseguido, y consigue, que su padre tolere y acepte la rareza de su relación, como si formara parte integrante del juego. Detrás de Maggie, protegido y entretenido, valga la expresión, exquisitamente engañado (y a ello también contribuye el Principino, fuente

de deleites para él) ha permitido, con notable serenidad y sin grandes riesgos, que las circunstancias de su vida pasen por aquellas que de forma tan sublime había proyectado. Pero el señor Verver no las había proyectado con detalles de la misma manera que tampoco yo lo había hecho, y que el Señor tenga piedad de mí, y resulta que la rareza radica precisamente en los detalles. Los detalles eran para él aquello por lo que debía casarse con Charlotte.

Y limpiamente, concluyó:

—Y ambas ayudan.

—¿«Ambas»?

—Quiero decir que si bien es cierto que Maggie, siempre en la brecha, le induce a creer que todo es bellamente armónico, tampoco cabe negar que a Charlotte no le corresponde menos mérito. Grande es el mérito que a Charlotte le corresponde.

Como remate de sus palabras, declaró:

—Charlotte trabaja como una mula.

Sí, allí estaba todo. Y el coronel miró a su cónyuge por encima de aquel todo, y le preguntó:

—¿Y el Príncipe trabaja como qué?

Mirando a su marido, repuso:

—¡Como un Príncipe!

Después de decir estas palabras, dio bruscamente por terminada la conversación y, disponiéndose a iniciar el ascenso de la escalera, volvió su muy adornada espalda a su marido, espalda en cuyos más extraños lugares, dominando las complejidades de su general aspecto, el rubí y el granate, la turquesa y el topacio brillaban como modestos símbolos del ingenio que había cosido las diversas piezas de satén de la argumentación de la señora Assingham.

El coronel la contemplaba como si le hubiera dejado apabullado por la impresión del dominio que tenía del tema tratado. Sí, el verdadero resultado final del drama que se había desarrollado entre los dos consistía en que, en cuanto hacía referencia a los puntos delicados de la vida —vida que para el coronel se había encogido notablemente—, tenía la esposa más clarividente que cupiera imaginar. Fija la vista en la espalda de su esposa en mayestática retirada, apagó la pequeña luz eléctrica que había presidido la conversación. Acto seguido, subió la escalera lo más cerca que pudo de su esposa, es decir, lo más cerca que le permitía la volandera cola de la ambarina capa de la señora Assingham, comprendiendo que la claridad que ambos habían conquistado era un alivio incluso para ella también y que, por fin, la sensación de amplitud que daba en su exposición la sostenía y la mantenía a flote.

Sin embargo, cuando llegaron al descansillo del piso superior, en donde la señora Assingham ya había conseguido que se encendiera una luz al pulsar un botón metálico, el coronel descubrió que su esposa todavía había contribuido más a avivar en él el germen de la curiosidad que a extinguirlo. La retuvo unos instantes más. Sí, porque había visto otra ciruela en el pastel:

—¿Qué quisiste decir hace poco cuando aseguraste que el Príncipe no siente interés por Charlotte?

—¿Que el Príncipe no siente «realmente» interés por Charlotte?

La señora Assingham recordó; después, con harta benevolencia, explicó:

—Quiero decir que los hombres no sienten verdadero interés cuando todo les resulta excesivamente fácil. De nueve casos entre diez, éste es el tratamiento que recibe la mujer que lo arriesga todo.

Después de dar esta explicación, añadió:

—Hace poco me has preguntado como qué trabaja el Príncipe, cuando en realidad tendrías que haberme preguntado como qué juega el Príncipe.

Sí, el coronel lo adivinó:

—¿Como un Príncipe?

Con mucho sentimiento, la señora Assingham dijo:

—Como un Príncipe. Es un Príncipe. Lo es profundamente. Y, en su caso, esto me parece hermoso. Es las altas esferas hay muchos menos príncipes de lo que se pretende; esto es lo que mayor valor le da. Quizá sea uno de los últimos príncipes, el último príncipe entre los príncipes de verdad. Por eso tenemos que aceptarle. Tenemos que aceptarle en toda su integridad, tal como es.

El coronel, después de pensar, preguntó:

—¿Y hasta qué punto le acepta Charlotte, caso de que le acepte?

Esta pregunta la dejó muda durante un rato y, mientras guardaba silencio, mirando fijamente a su marido, le agarró del brazo, en cuya carne él sintió la respuesta con claridad suficiente. De esta manera y

un poco separada de él le transmitió la más firme, la más larga y profunda comunicación que jamás hubiera recibido de ella.

—A pesar de todo nada ocurrirá. Nada ha ocurrido. Y nada está ocurriendo.

Un tanto defraudado, el coronel dijo:

—Comprendo. A nosotros.

—A nosotros. ¿A quién si no?

Y el coronel se daba plenamente cuenta de lo mucho que su esposa deseaba que la comprendiera.

Ella dijo:

—No sabemos nada, ¡absolutamente nada!

Era un pacto que el coronel debía firmar. En consecuencia, escribió su nombre:

—No sabemos nada, ¡absolutamente nada!

Era como el santo y seña de los centinelas en la noche. En el mismo tono Fanny Assingham añadió:

—Somos inocentes como recién nacidos.

El coronel preguntó:

—¿Y por qué no decir que somos tan inocentes como ellos?

—Por la mejor de las razones, a saber, que nosotros lo somos mucho más. —¿Y cómo es posible?

—¿Que ellos lo sean menos? Facilísimo. Nosotros podemos ser cualquier cosa.

—¿Absolutos idiotas?

En un susurro Fanny repuso:

—Absolutos idiotas. Y no sabes tú qué descanso representará para nosotros.

Bueno, la verdad es que en estas palabras el coronel halló motivos de meditación:

—Pero ¿no se darán cuenta de que no lo somos? Fanny apenas vaciló antes de contestar:

—Charlotte y el Príncipe creen realmente que lo somos, con lo cual ya tenemos mucho ganado. El señor Verver cree en nuestra inteligencia, pero él no cuenta.

—¿Y Maggie? ¿No está al tanto?

—¿De que vemos un poco más allá de nuestras narices?

Sí, Fanny Assingham tardó un poco más en contestar a su pregunta:

—Cabe la posibilidad de que lo intuya, pero, si así es, no dará muestras de ello, de lo cual se sigue lo mismo.

Bob Assingham enarcó las cejas y preguntó:

—¿Quieres decir que de ello se sigue que tampoco podemos ayudarla? —Precisamente ésta es la manera en que la ayudaremos.

—¿Portándonos como si fuéramos tontos?

Fanny levantó las manos y exclamó:

—Lo único que Maggie quiere es parecer todavía más tonta. Por lo tanto, ¡no hay problema!

Fanny Assingham dio por terminado el asunto, contando ya con la conformidad de su marido. Sin embargo, algo la retuvo allí. Este algo se había incorporado a su campo de visión como una nueva oleada de claridad. Dijo:

—Ahora lo veo. Quiero decir que ahora veo lo que me has preguntado, o sea, cómo he podido darme cuenta hoy, en Eaton Square, de que Maggie había despertado.

Realmente parecía que Fanny estuviera viéndolo. Ahora Fanny dijo:

—Lo he comprendido al verlos juntos.

—¿Al ver a Maggie con su padre?

El coronel había perdido de nuevo el hilo. Advirtió:

—Pero los has visto juntos con anterioridad muchas veces.

—Sí, aunque jamás con mi actual visión. Además nunca habían estado sometidos, hasta el presente, a esta prueba, a la prueba de una tan larga ausencia de los otros dos, de los otros dos juntos.

—Posiblemente es verdad. Ahora bien, si Maggie y el señor Verver insistieron…

—Si insistieron, ¿a santo de qué tenemos que considerarlo una prueba? Pues por la sencilla razón de que se ha convertido en una prueba sin que ellos lo quisieran. Lo tenían todo en la palma de la mano, y en la palma de la mano se les ha estropeado.

El coronel dijo:

—El asunto se ha agriado, ¿no es eso?

—La palabra que has empleado me parece horrible. Digamos que ha «cambiado».

Fanny meditó unos instantes y añadió:

—Quizá Maggie quiso comprobar hasta qué punto puede tolerar. Ahora lo ha visto. Ocurre que ella ha sido la única que ha insistido, quiero decir que ha insistido en que los otros dos efectuaran esa visita. Sí, porque su padre en nada insiste. Y Maggie le observa.

El marido de Fanny Assingham pareció quedar impresionado por estas palabras:

—¿Le observa?

—Le observa a fin de ver el primer leve síntoma. Quiero decir el primer síntoma indicativo de que se da cuenta. Y tal como te he dicho, este síntoma no se da. Pero ahí está Maggie, esperándolo. Y he percibido la manera en que observa. Sí, la he pillado con las manos en la masa, valga la expresión. No ha podido evitar que yo lo percibiera, a pesar de haber abandonado adrede su puesto de observación, y me ha acompañado a casa para arrojarme tierra a los ojos. Y la he recibido toda. La tierra, quiero decir. Y gracias a eso, he visto.

Con aire de suprema clarividencia, Fanny cogió la manecilla de la puerta de su dormitorio. Dijo:

—Afortunadamente, también he podido ver que Maggie ha triunfado. Él, su padre, no ha dado el más leve síntoma.

—¿Estás segura?

—Segurísima. Y no lo dará. Buenas noches.

Ya estas palabras, Fanny añadió:

—Antes morirá ella, Maggie.

Libro segundo

La Princesa

Cuarta parte

Capítulo XXV

Pasaron muchos días antes de que la Princesa comenzara a aceptar la idea de haber hecho algo que no siempre hacía; en realidad, de haber prestado oídos a una voz interior que le hablaba en un nuevo tono. Sin embargo, estas insistentes demoras de la reflexión eran fruto de reconocimientos y sensaciones ya existentes, sobre todo de la que ella había alterado, en un momento determinado, y con un solo toque de la mano; aquella situación que durante tanto tiempo le había parecido prácticamente invariable. Esta situación había ocupado, durante meses y meses, el mismísimo centro del jardín de su vida, pero se había levantado allí como una alta y extraña torre de marfil, o quizá como una maravillosamente bella, aunque exótica, pagoda, como una estructura recubierta de dura y reluciente porcelana, pintada y adornada, con salientes aleros y campanillas de plata que tintineaban cuando las agitaban ocasionales brisas. Había paseado alrededor de aquella estructura. Esto era lo que a la Princesa le parecía. Había desarrollado su existencia en el espacio que le habían dejado a su disposición para circular, un espacio que a veces le parecía anchuroso y otras, estrecho. Alzando la vista constantemente a la bella estructura tan alta y tan amplia, no conseguía averiguar, por el momento, por qué punto podría entrar en ella caso de desearlo. Pero se daba la extraña circunstancia de que la Princesa no lo había deseado hasta entonces; además, aun cuando su vista parecía distinguir lugares interiores, especialmente en la parte alta de la torre, que forzosamente debían tener la función de aberturas y miradores, no veía puerta alguna que diera acceso a la torre desde el cómodo nivel de su jardín. La gran superficie adornada había sido siempre e invariablemente impenetrable e inexcrutable. Sin embargo, actualmente en sus meditaciones Maggie tenía la impresión de que había dejado de limitarse a dar vuelta alrededor de la torre y a fijarse en sus alturas, que había dejado de mirar y maravillarse de una forma muy vaga e inevitable. Se había sorprendido a sí misma en el acto de detenerse, luego en el de quedarse largo rato detenida y, por fin, en el de acercarse llegando a un punto de cercanía sin precedentes. Aquella estructura bien hubiera podido ser, por la prohibición que se imponía de acercarse a ella, una mezquita con la que ningún infiel podía tomarse libertades, y el edificio estaba rodeado de un aire tal que sugería a la mente la imagen de descalzarse antes de entrar, incluso de pagar con la propia vida el delito de ser hallado en su interior en calidad de intruso. Desde luego, Maggie no había llegado al concepto de pagar con la propia vida un acto suyo, cualquiera que fuese. Sin embargo, se había comportado de manera que era exactamente igual que si hubiese sometido a prueba uno de los raros paneles de porcelana, golpeándolo una o dos veces. Sí, lo cierto es que Maggie había golpeado con la mano aquella estructura, pero ignoraba si lo había hecho para que le dieran entrada. Había aplicado la mano a un punto fresco y suave y había esperado a ver qué ocurría. Algo había ocurrido realmente. Fue como si, después del contacto, tras una breve espera, hubiera llegado a sus oídos un sonido procedente del interior, un sonido suficientemente indicativo de que había sido oída su llamada.

Sin embargo, si esta imagen puede muy bien representar que nuestra joven amiga tenía conciencia de que se había producido recientemente, hacía pocos días, un cambio en su vida, también debemos observar, al mismo tiempo, que Maggie buscaba y hallaba en cierta medida en la renovada circulación, como la hemos denominado, un alivio en la sensación de la que quizá tuviera que responder de algo hecho por ella. La pagoda, en el florido jardín de Maggie, representaba el apaño —¿y de qué otra manera podemos llamarlo?— por el que ella había podido, de forma tan sorprendente, contraer matrimonio sin romper con

su pasado, como ella decía. Se había entregado a su marido sin el más leve matiz de reserva, sin una sola condición y, a pesar de ello, en ningún momento se había apartado siquiera un centímetro de su padre. Había gozado de la gran dicha de ver cómo los dos hombres se encariñaban noblemente el uno con el otro: en su matrimonio no hubo nada que tanta felicidad le proporcionara como el hecho de haber dado un nuevo amigo al mayor y más solitario de los dos. Además, lo que mayormente había enriquecido el éxito logrado era que el matrimonio de su padre no había rendido menores beneficios que el suyo propio. El hecho de que el padre hubiera dado aquel gran paso, con la misma libertad que su hija, no había supuesto que ésta quedara relegada en absoluto. Que fuera notable el hecho de que los dos hubieran podido al mismo tiempo estar tan separados y tan juntos constituía un hecho que jamás, ni siquiera al inicio, le pareció dudoso a Maggie. En realidad, desde el principio y en todo momento, y en igual medida para cada uno de los dos, había que considerarlo como una consecuencia de su inspiración y recíproco apoyo. Muchas eran las cosas de las que Maggie y su padre no estaban enamorados, como las ráfagas de brillantez, de audacia, de originalidad, cosas que, por lo menos en cuanto hacía referencia a aquel buen hombre y a su hija, no se ajustaban, ni mucho menos, a su manera de ser; pero les gustaba pensar que habían dado a su vivir esa insólita amplitud y forma liberal que muchas familias, muchas parejas y, sobre todo, muchas parejas de parejas, no habían podido alcanzar. Esta verdad había sido puesta claramente de manifiesto ante ellos por el luminoso testimonio de la envidia plenamente explícita de la mayoría de sus amigos, quienes habían manifestado una y otra vez que forzosamente tenían que ser, a juzgar por su manera de vivir, y a fin de poder tratarse en semejantes términos, personas dotadas de la más alta bondad, quedando incluidos en el elogio, naturalmente, Charlotte y Americo. Les complacía —¿y cómo no iba a ser así?— advertir que de ellos emanaba tal esplendor. Esto le había gustado al padre de Maggie y a ésta, personas ambas dotadas de un carácter tan poco dado a las presunciones que apenas habrían estado seguras de su triunfo si no hubieran visto aquel agradable reflejo del mismo. De esta manera su felicidad había fructificado, de esta manera la torre de marfil, visible y admirable desde todos los puntos de vista del campo social, sin duda alguna, se había levantado planta tras planta. La presente renuencia de Maggie a preguntarse, con la debida claridad, por qué motivo la contemplación de la torre había dejado de proporcionarle placer representaba, por lo tanto, una laguna en aquella ideal congruencia de la que dependía su bienestar moral en casi todo momento. Para ser congruente ella siempre había sabido recortar, más o menos, su propia actuación.

Al darse cuenta de que por primera vez se movía en las oscuras sombras de una posición falsa, Maggie concluyó que o no hubiera debido dejar de sentirse bien centrada —es decir, confiada—, o hubiera debido reconocer que estaba equivocada, a pesar de lo cual se limitó, durante un tiempo, a dar a los problemas que consigo tenía el tratamiento de comportarse como el perro *spaniel* de sedosa capa que sale corriendo del estanque y se sacude el agua de las orejas. Las sacudidas de la cabeza de Maggie, reiteradas una y otra vez, eran en gran medida de esta naturaleza; pero el *spaniel* con la salvedad del rudo equivalente de su ladrido, no tiene el recurso de musitar para sí, como Maggie hacía, que en realidad nada le había ocurrido. No, no había caído, no había padecido accidente alguno, no se había mojado. Esto era, por lo menos, de lo que presumía hasta el momento en que comenzó a preguntarse si acaso no habría cogido frío, se hubiera mojado o no. De todas maneras, no podía recordar período alguno de su vida en que se hubiera sentido tan excitada. Desde luego, tampoco podía recordar período alguno —lo cual era punto de especial importancia — que le impusiera la necesidad de ocultar la excitación. El nacimiento de esta nueva excitación se transformó en un importante pasatiempo, al parecer de Maggie, debido precisamente al ingenio que era preciso poner a contribución para mantener oculto a la vista aquello que había nacido. El ejercicio de este ingenio era privado y absorbente. Si se me permite multiplicar mis metáforas, compararía a Maggie con la atemorizada pero amante madre joven de un hijo ilegítimo. La idea que la poseía sería, de acuerdo con nuestra analogía, la prueba de la malandanza; pero, al mismo tiempo, sólo otro síntoma de una relación constante, que para ella significaba más que cualquier otra cosa en el mundo. Maggie había vivido los años suficientes para averiguar por sí misma que toda pasión profundamente arraigada causa dolores al mismo tiempo que placeres, y que gracias a esas penas y ansiedades tenemos más profunda conciencia de tal pasión. Jamás había dudado de la fuerza de los sentimientos que la unían a su marido, pero el llegar bruscamente a tener conciencia de que estos sentimientos habían comenzado a vibrar con tal violencia que producían tensión bien podía significar, a fin de cuentas, que ella, al igual que millares de mujeres, gozaba plenamente del privilegio de la pasión. ¿Y por qué no iba a ser legítimamente así, cuando, después de meditarlo, no veía razón alguna que lo impidiera? La mejor razón que podría impedirlo sería la posibilidad de una consecuencia desagradable o perjudicial para los demás, principalmente para los que jamás la

habían molestado con el egoísmo de sus pasiones. Pero debidamente evitado este peligro, gozar plenamente de la propia pasión sólo comportaba, en la misma medida, el uso de la propia discreción, o el saber interpretar debidamente el papel que a una le correspondía. De una manera al principio oscura, pero que se hizo poco a poco más y más clara, la Princesa advirtió que llevaba mucho tiempo sin ejercer debidamente su discreción. El caso en que se encontraba ahora se parecía a lo que le ocurría con el baile, que otrora tanto le había gustado. Radicaba el problema en recordar unos pasos que sólo vagamente guardaba en la mente, pues había dejado de asistir a los bailes. Ahora volvería a asistir a ellos. Éste parecía ser el remedio, en expresión libre aunque un tanto burda. De los profundos receptáculos en que los había guardado, Maggie sacaría los adornos congruentes con las grandes ocasiones, de los que de ningún modo tenía escasa provisión. Fácilmente podemos imaginarla en esta ocupación, en momentos de paz y soledad, en visitas subrepticias y a la vacilante luz de una vela, hundiendo la mano en su rica colección, viendo una vez más cómo relucían sus joyas tímida pero inconfundiblemente. En realidad, ésta puede ser muy bien la fiel imagen de la parcialmente ahogada agitación de Maggie, de la distracción que halló en referir su crisis, hasta cierto punto eficazmente, para satisfacer sus necesidades en la mayor medida posible.

Sin embargo, debemos añadir que Maggie se hubiera encontrado en un apuro, si hubiera tenido que determinar, especialmente al principio, a qué orden pertenecía en justicia el paso que dio la tarde en que su marido regresó de Matcham con Charlotte: si pertenecía al orden de propio dominio o al de una expresión más amplia. Sí, fue claramente un paso por parte de Maggie el decidirse a hacer algo, allí y en aquel momento, que pareciera insólito a Americo, a pesar de que el quebrantamiento de las costumbres establecidas había consistido tan sólo en hacer lo preciso para que Americo no la encontrara, como sin duda esperaba, en Eaton Square. Aunque al Príncipe le pareciera raro, tuvo que regresar a su casa, y allí recibir la impresión de que Maggie le esperaba, un tanto quisquillosa, o por lo menos impaciente y libremente. Se trataba de pequeñas variaciones y leves maniobras que, como hemos dicho, ella efectuaba con infinita sensación de intencionalidad. El que esperase junto al fuego del hogar el regreso de su marido después de una ausencia, superficialmente hubiera podido parecer el acto más natural del mundo, y además el único que su marido podía esperar lógicamente. Por las circunstancias que rodearon dicho acto, éste era normal y corriente: sin embargo, en realidad tuvo en todos sus aspectos, ante la activa fantasía de Maggie, el carácter de representar que había hecho cuanto se había propuesto. Había puesto su pensamiento a prueba y el resultado fue que estaba dotado de filo. Ésta era la realidad ante la que se hallaba, a saber: que ya no jugaba con herramientas inútiles y sin filo, sino con herramientas cortantes. Diez veces al día aparecía ante su vista el destello de una hoja desnuda, y ante esta visión Maggie tenía que cerrar casi siempre los ojos, y casi siempre sentía el impulso de engañarse a sí misma mediante el movimiento y el sonido. Sencillamente se había limitado, cierto miércoles, a trasladarse a Portland Place en vez de quedarse en Eaton Square; de antemano —como ella se repetía una y otra vez— no parecía que un hecho tan normal y corriente fuera a trastornar el curso de la historia. Sin embargo, esto era lo que había ocurrido. A Maggie se le quedó profundamente grabado en la mente, en el transcurso de una hora, que entre todo lo que había hecho nada contaría tanto en el futuro todavía indeterminado como el acto antes referido; ni siquiera, quizá, lo que había hecho en la vieja y dorada Roma al acceder a la petición de matrimonio hecha por Americo. Sin embargo, mediante su postura agazapada, la postura propia de una tímida tigresa, no había pretendido nada temerariamente definitivo, nada torpemente fundamental, por lo que le daba diversas denominaciones, calificando su actitud de grotesca o envidiosa, reduciendo en la medida de lo posible la *portée* de lo que de ella se siguió.

Maggie solamente había querido acercarse, acercarse a algo que no podía, que no quería definir ni siquiera a solas consigo misma, y el grado del acercamiento conseguido resultaba incalculable en cuanto a avance. Actualmente multiplicaba los disimulos y las distracciones, fueran cuales fueren los efectos que se produjeran en ella, pero no conseguía evitar volver a vivir, en cualquier instante que quisiera —sí, ella podía determinar estos instantes a voluntad, fijarlos en el tiempo deseado—, la novedad de la relación a que dio lugar el proporcionar a su marido la primera sorpresa con la que le había obsequiado. Poco había sido, pero se había debido íntegramente a Maggie; la escena entera estaba allí como un gran cuadro colgado en la pared de su cotidiano vivir, con el que ésta podía hacer lo que quisiera.

El recuerdo era una sucesión de momentos que todavía podían contemplarse, casi de la misma manera que se recuerdan los diferentes hechos llevados a cabo en una obra representada en un escenario, una escena representada de tal manera que causa gran impresión a quien se halla en uno de los palcos. Algunos de estos momentos destacaban sobre los demás; éstos eran los que mayormente sentía Maggie, los que podía

contar como las firmes perlas de un collar, y pertenecían de manera principal al período que precedió a la cena, cena que aquella noche había sido muy tarde, pasadas las nueve, debido a la demora con que llegó Americo. Eran partes de la experiencia vivida por Maggie —aunque esta experiencia estaba compuesta de muchas otras— entre las cuales su sensibilidad podía seguir efectuando matizadas discriminaciones. Debemos decir que, ante las escenas subsiguientes, la llama del recuerdo se convirtió en un resplandor que los igualaba a todos, como la lámpara de una capilla lateral cargada de incienso. De todas maneras el gran momento del consciente revivir en la memoria era, sin la menor duda, el primero: el extraño y medido silencio que Maggie había estimado en aquellos instantes, totalmente ajeno a sus propias intenciones —¿durante cuánto tiempo?, ¿es que nunca llegaría a poder determinar cuánto duró?—, pero que no podía romper aunque lo quisiera. Maggie se encontraba en la sala más pequeña, aquella en la que siempre solía aposentarse; al regresar a su casa para quedarse en ella, había decidido premeditadamente vestirse para la cena. Maravillaba pensar en las muchas cosas que había calculado con respecto a este pequeño incidente, y éste era asunto cuya importancia sólo podía calibrarse de forma aproximada. Americo llegaría tarde, muy tarde; y ésta era la única certidumbre con que podía contar. También cabía la posibilidad de que considerase mejor quedarse allí, incluso después de saber que ella se había ido, si Americo iba en compañía de Charlotte directamente a Eaton Square. Maggie no le había dejado recado alguno, en previsión de tal posibilidad. Esto representaba otro matiz en su decisión, aun cuando su efecto quizá consistiera en retrasar todavía más la llegada de Americo. Quizá él supusiera que su esposa había cenado ya o que se quedara en Eaton Square por lo mucho que tenía que contar, con el solo fin de ser amable con el padre de Maggie. En este aspecto, Maggie había visto a Americo llegar, en su amabilidad, a puntos más extremos que el referido, y más de una vez y a este mismo fin había llegado a la oportunidad de vestirse para la cena.

Maggie había evitado ahora semejante sacrificio; durante el tiempo de que dispuso se había arreglado hasta que logró tener un aspecto increíblemente lozano e indudablemente elegante, lo cual aumentó, mientras esperaba y esperaba, aquella tensión de su espíritu que luego manifestó esperando como al acecho. Maggie hizo cuanto pudo por sí sola y con gran intensidad para evitar que se le notara, si bien fue incapaz de seguir leyendo la pálida novela en que estaba enfrascada —¡esto, *par example*, era superior a sus fuerzas! —, sí pudo, por lo menos, estar sentada junto a la lámpara con el libro en las manos; estar sentada y ataviada con su último vestido, que llevaba por vez primera, como en una eclosión a su alrededor, rígido y grandioso, quizá demasiado rígido y demasiado grandioso para llevarlo en circunstancias familiares y domésticas, aunque destacando en esta ocasión, que a pesar de todo osaba esperar Maggie por sus indudables méritos intrínsecos. Consultó reiteradas veces el reloj, pero se negó a sí misma el débil lujo de pasear de arriba abajo, a pesar de que le constaba que hacerlo allí sobre el reluciente suelo le haría sentirse todavía más bellamente ataviada, gracias al rumor y a la «caída» de la tela. Lo malo consistía en que esto contribuiría a que se sintiera todavía más nerviosa: exactamente lo que no deseaba. Las únicas gotas de ansiedad que se derramaron fue cuando permitió que su pensamiento y su vista se fijaran en la parte frontal de su vestido, con complacencia y a modo de refugio o de distracción, cuando ella podía contemplarlo durante el tiempo suficiente para preguntarse si realmente le hubiera satisfecho a Charlotte. En lo tocante a su atuendo, Maggie siempre había sido un tanto timorata y vacilante. En el curso del año último, sobre todo, Maggie había vivido, en lo referente a ropas, influida por el posible e inexcrutable parecer de Charlotte. Sus vestidos eran sencillamente los más encantadores y sugestivos que mujer alguna hubiera llevado jamás. Se daba una especie de poética justicia o justo resarcimiento en el hecho de que Charlotte pudiera ejercer libremente su talento en este terreno, gracias a la omnipotencia de que gozaba. En este asunto, Maggie se sentía constante e íntimamente «dividida»; por una parte, consciente de la imposibilidad de copiar a su amiga; por otra, consciente de la imposibilidad de sondearla por su cuenta hasta las últimas profundidades. Sí, ésa era una de aquellas cosas que Maggie moriría sin saber. Sí, Maggie moriría sin saber, incluso después de haber comentado cuanto se pudiera comentar, lo que Charlotte pensaba realmente del aspecto que presentaba su hijastra, ataviada con los supuestamente ingeniosos resultados de sus personales experimentos. Charlotte siempre había sido muy amable en lo tocante a las audacias de vestimenta de su hijastra y, en beneficio de ésta, las comentaba en los mejores términos posibles; pero en el fondo del pensamiento de Maggie siempre había llameado esporádicamente la sospecha de que las palabras eran sólo amabilidades y no juicios animados por una franqueza absoluta, sino sólo relativa. ¿No sería que Charlotte, dotada de tan perfecta visión crítica, había considerado a Maggie como caso sin remedio, sin remedio de acuerdo con un criterio serio y, en consecuencia, se había inventado, para aplicárselo a ella, un criterio diferente e inferior, de acuerdo con el cual pacientemente la tranquilizaba y toleraba, ya que esto era lo

único que cabía hacer? ¿No sería que Charlotte, dicho sea con otras palabras, había aceptado con secreta desesperación, quizá con irritación, que Maggie era un ser ridículo? Por tanto, lo mejor que ésta podía hacer era preguntarse, de vez en cuando, si le cabía la posibilidad de sorprender a Charlotte mediante algo que estuviera menos alejado de la verdad. De este tenor era lo que Maggie se preguntaba, mientras los ausentes seguían demorándose, con referencia a las apariencias que se había propuesto revestir. Pero el único resultado que Maggie conseguía, una y otra vez, se perdía en el denso aire que había comenzado a cubrir más y más las preguntas sin respuestas ante las que nuestra joven amiga se hallaba. Estaban allí esas cuestiones y formaban algo parecido a un formidable montón de objetos mezclados, que aún no habían sido clasificados, todos metidos en un cuarto, cuarto ante el cual ahora había pasado una y otra vez al recorrer el pasillo de su vida. Siempre que podía pasaba ante aquel cuarto sin abrir la puerta. De vez en cuando daba vueltas a la llave de la puerta, la abría y arrojaba al cuarto un nuevo objeto. De esta manera iba limpiando de obstáculos su camino. Estos obstáculos aumentaban la confusa mezcolanza, de manera que parecía que hallaran su debido lugar en el montón gracias a cierto instinto de afinidad. En resumen, aquellos objetos sabían adónde ir a parar. Ahora, gracias a un acto mental, cuando Maggie abría la puerta del cuarto, lo hacía prácticamente con cierto sentido del método y de la experiencia. Lo que jamás llegaría a saber acerca del pensamiento de Charlotte lo había arrojado al interior del cuarto en cuestión. Sí, no se encontraría solo, tendría compañía, y Maggie podía quedarse allí de pie el tiempo suficiente para ver cómo lo arrojado iba a parar al rincón que le correspondía. Su visión de todo ello, además, la hubiera obligado a quedarse con la vista fija en el caso de que su atención hubiera gozado de mayor libertad en aquella masa de objetos inútiles, congruentes e incongruentes, que esperaban ulteriores adiciones. En realidad, la visión de aquello le indujo a emitir un vago suspiro y a dar media vuelta sobre sí misma, actitud que quedó determinada por la definitiva y brusca extinción del escenario interior por el exterior. Una puerta muy diferente se había abierto, y allí estaba su marido.

Más tarde, Maggie pensó que eso había sido lo más extraño que ella podía consentir. Esencialmente había sido la causa del brusco giro que tomó su vida. Su marido había regresado, la había seguido desde la otra casa visiblemente dubitativo; sí, esto estuvo escrito en su cara durante los primeros instantes. Estuvo escrito sólo durante los primeros segundos y desapareció rápidamente tan pronto como comenzaron a hablar. Pero mientras duró estuvo escrito con grandes letras, y aunque Maggie no sabía de cierto lo que esperaba de su esposo, estimó que no había esperado que se diera el más leve matiz de embarazo. La causa de dicho embarazo —y lo denominó así para tener la seguridad de que calificaba la situación de la manera más grave posible—, la causa de aquella expresión concreta era el perceptible deseo del Príncipe de saber cómo encontraría a la Princesa. Y ¿por qué ocurrió al principio? Esta pregunta acudió después reiteradas veces a su mente. La pregunta pendía en el aire como si fuera la clave de todo. Pero, en el momento de los hechos y con la intuición de esta pregunta en la mente, Maggie tuvo la avasalladora impresión de que era un ser importante, de que debía atacar inmediatamente a su marido, y que esto entrañaba una clase de violencia muy superior a cuanto había previsto de antemano. En realidad, en aquel momento no estaba ausente de la mente de Maggie la posibilidad de que su marido se portara como un abyecto tonto, por lo menos durante unos instantes. Durante diez segundos tuvo miedo de que la situación tomara este cariz, hasta tal punto la incertidumbre en el rostro del Príncipe había pasado inmediatamente a ser incertidumbre en el ambiente. Unas pocas palabras en tono de impaciencia, pronunciadas en voz apenas un poco más alta de lo normal, un estallido como: «¿Se puede saber qué pretendes, qué pretendes?», cualquier nota de este tenor hubiera bastado para que Maggie agachara la cabeza, y era tanto más notable cuanto que jamás había pretendido engañarla, bien lo sabía Dios. Por parte de Maggie, era tan rara aquella pequeña alteración de la costumbre o aquella infracción de las presuposiciones del Príncipe, que la menor duda, antes de que pudiera disiparse el más leve asomo de la misma, ya había producido el efecto propio de una complicación. Para el Príncipe significaba una diferencia que Maggie no podía medir el que ella le hubiera recibido en casa a solas, en vez de recibirle en otra parte y con otra gente. En el fondo, a la mente de Maggie acudía una y otra vez el pensamiento de que la inexpresividad de que el Príncipe dio muestras, antes de que pudiera ver, forzosamente tenía un significado a poco que Maggie se fijara, y quizá un valor histórico que rebasaba la importancia de las expresiones momentáneas generales. Como es natural, en ese momento ella no tenía a su alcance la noción de qué era lo que el Príncipe deseaba ver. De noción a su alcance, por no hablar ya de corazón palpitante, bastaba con que el Príncipe viera, con que viera a su esposa en el salón de su propia casa a la hora en que era más pertinente que estuviese allí.

Era cierto que el Príncipe no la había interpelado en tono de reto. Maggie creía ahora que su esposo

había tenido la impresión de que algo insólitamente preparado y marcado había en su actitud y atuendo durante los instantes en que avanzó sonriendo hacia ella, y de esta manera, sin la más leve vacilación, la tomó en sus brazos. Las dudas sólo existieron al principio; ahora Maggie se daba cuenta de que el Príncipe las había superado sin su ayuda. No, ella no le había ayudado. Y así era: por una parte, Maggie no podía determinar a qué se debían aquellas dudas; por otra —principalmente teniendo en cuenta que el Príncipe no se lo había preguntado—, tampoco podía explicar las razones por las que estaba agitada. Esto lo había sabido perfectamente y en todo momento; lo había sabido con renovada intensidad en presencia del Príncipe, y si éste le hubiera formulado una pregunta, con ello habría oprimido en Maggie el resorte de la temeridad. Y era raro que lo más natural fuese que lo que Maggie dijera al Príncipe revistiera esa apariencia de temeridad, pero ella tenía más clara conciencia que en cualquier momento anterior de que, cualquiera que fuera la apariencia de lo que dijera, todo terminaría afectando más o menos directamente a su padre, cuya vida se desarrollaba ahora tan serenamente, de acuerdo con lo aceptado, que todo género de alteración de la conciencia de su padre, incluso en el posible sentido de animar su vivir, haría vacilar el precioso equilibrio en que vivían. Esto era lo que había en el fondo del pensamiento de Maggie; que su equilibrio lo era todo; sabía también que este equilibrio era precario, y que cualquier cosa, por leve que fuera, podía alterarlo. Era el equilibrio o, en todo caso, el temor consciente que Maggie sentía de que se alterara, lo que hizo que el corazón se le subiera a la garganta; el mismo temor se hallaba, por ambas partes, en la silenciosa mirada que Americo y ella intercambiaron. El feliz equilibrio que exigían estas consideraciones era, según confesaron ellos mismos, asunto delicado. Pero el hecho de que su marido también tuviera el hábito de la ansiedad y de la cautela general sólo sirvió, a fin de cuentas, para unirlos más. En consecuencia, habría sido muy hermoso que Maggie hubiera hablado en nombre del equilibrio y en nombre de la alegría que le producía que Americo y ella albergaran tan parecidos sentimientos al respecto, permitiendo expresar la verdad acerca del tema de su propio comportamiento, acerca del tema de la conducta un poco mezquina que, por el momento, constituía un pálido ejemplo de excentricidad.

«¿Por qué, por qué me he empeñado en que esta noche no cenemos juntos? Bueno, pues porque durante todo el día he estado deseando tanto estar a solas contigo que no podía resistir más, y porque no parecía que hubiera grandes razones que impidieran el que lo intentara. Esto es lo que pensé, a pesar de que al principio parezca raro, si tenemos en cuenta todas las cosas que hemos conseguido mediante nuestra maravillosa manera de tratarnos con tolerancia el uno al otro. Durante estos últimos días me has causado una impresión que no sé cómo expresar, una impresión de estar más ausente que en cualquier otra ocasión, tan ausente que no podíamos seguir adelante los dos juntos. No hay nada que objetar, me doy perfecta cuenta de cuán hermoso es así, globalmente considerado. Pero siempre llega el día en que algo se quiebra, en que la copa, llena hasta el borde, comienza a rebosar. Esto es lo que ha ocurrido con la necesidad que tengo de ti, durante todo el día la copa ha estado tan llena que no podía aguantarla. Por esto te lo cuento todo ahora, y lo hago porque eres la razón de mi vida. A fin de cuentas, no hace falta que te diga que estoy tan enamorada de ti como el primer día, con la salvedad de que hay ciertas horas —que sé cuando se acercan porque casi me atemorizan— en las que veo que lo estoy todavía más. Llegan por sí solas, y siempre llegan… A fin de cuentas, a fin de cuentas…» Palabras como éstas fueron las que no sonaron, sin embargo parecía que el sonido no emitido hubiera quedado ahogado en sus propias vibraciones. Las manifestaciones se habrían hundido por su propio peso si el Príncipe hubiera permitido que se produjeran. En pocos segundos, ya antes de que llegara tan extremada situación, él había comprendido lo que necesitaba comprender, es decir, que su esposa estaba dando testimonio de que le adoraba, de que le echaba en falta y de que le deseaba. «A fin de cuentas, a fin de cuentas», como Maggie había dicho, ella estaba en lo cierto. Y a esto era a lo que él tenía que responder desde el momento en que, tal como hemos dicho, el Príncipe vio; lo que el Príncipe tenía que considerar era la realidad más pertinente. El Príncipe la abrazó prieta y largamente, expresando de esta manera su reunión personal, siendo ésta, evidentemente, una de las maneras de hacerlo. Emitió un rumor hondo y vago y frotó su mejilla tiernamente contra el rostro de su esposa, contra el lado de la cara de Maggie contrario al que oprimía contra su pecho. Con carácter no menos evidente, ésta era una manera de conseguir lo anterior; y había muchas otras maneras, dicho en pocas palabras, a disposición de la reconquistada tranquilidad del Príncipe, maneras que dieron lugar al buen humor con el que Maggie pensó después en el infinito tacto de su esposo. Esto se debió, sin duda alguna, a que el concepto del tacto apareció claramente al cabo de un cuarto de hora en que el Príncipe habló generosamente y Maggie preguntó con afabilidad. Le contó cómo había pasado el día, le habló de la feliz idea de desviarse en el camino de regreso juntamente con Charlotte, le explicó la aventura

en busca de catedrales y cómo, a fin de cuentas, resultó un asunto más complicado de lo que habían creído en un principio. De todas maneras la última conclusión de todo lo anterior fue que estaba fatigado, muy fatigado, y que quería tomar un baño y vestirse para la cena, a cuyo fin esperaba que Maggie le excusara, aunque durante el más breve tiempo posible. Luego ella recordaría algo que había ocurrido entre los dos en ese momento, recordaría que él, al llegar a la puerta, se había vuelto para mirarla un instante, antes de desaparecer, y recordaría la expresión de su cara cuando, primero dubitativamente y luego muy decidida, le preguntó si no podía subir con él para ayudarle. Quizá el Príncipe también había dudado unos momentos, pero por fin declinó la oferta, y ella conservaría en la memoria la sonrisa con que él había acompañado sus palabras manifestando la opinión de que, si subía, no cenarían hasta las diez, y de que solo se las arreglaría mejor y más deprisa. Tal como he dicho, Maggie recordó esas cosas que intervinieron en sus posteriores sensaciones, jugando como las luces juegan en una impresión general. Pero no por ello tuvo carácter borroso lo que ocurrió a continuación. Uno de los hechos que ocurrieron después, el primero precisamente, fue el tiempo, nada breve, de acuerdo con la apreciación posterior y más analítica de Maggie, que duró la segunda espera de la reaparición del Príncipe. Era cierto que si Maggie hubiera subido con él, incluso animada por la mejor voluntad, habría sido un estorbo, ya que, en realidad, casi siempre la gente se las apaña mejor para ir de prisa sola que acompañada. De todas maneras, difícilmente habría demorado más al Príncipe con su presencia de lo que él, a juicio de Maggie, se demoró. Debemos añadir, sin embargo, que ahora en el estado mental de esta personita tan dada a pensar no se daba la simple rudeza de la impaciencia. Algo había ocurrido rápidamente, gracias a la feliz visión del Príncipe y gracias a que ella dejó de temer haberle enojado por obligarle a tanto ir y venir. Para el espíritu de Maggie, la desaparición de lo temible siempre comportaba, al principio, la positiva aparición de lo dulce. Hacía tiempo que nada había sido para Maggie tan dulce como la importancia que sus presentes emociones dieron de repente a su sentido de la posesión.

Capítulo XXVI

Americo volvía a estar lejos de ella. Maggie volvía a estar sola, allí sentada o bien paseando por el cuarto, ya que la presencia de Americo en la casa había sido la causa de que ella dejara de abstenerse de hacer esto último. Sin embargo, y a pesar de todo, el momento rebosaba todavía de los efectos de la cercanía de Americo; sobre todo, los efectos, extraños en una intimidad tan arraigada, de una casi renovada visión del aspecto del Príncipe. Sólo hacía cinco días que Maggie le había visto por última vez, y éste parecía seguir allí, de pie ante ella, como si acabara de llegar de un lejano país, de un largo viaje, de pasar muchos peligros y fatigas. Esta inagotable variedad de la atracción de Americo ¿qué significaba sino que por fortuna estaba casada, dicho sea con toda sencillez, con una persona absolutamente deslumbrante? Se trataba de algo viejo, muy viejo, pero la verdad resplandecía ante Maggie como la belleza de un cuadro de familia, del armonioso retrato de un antepasado que, después de largo tiempo, Maggie hubiera contemplado, casi sorprendida. La deslumbrante persona se encontraba en el piso superior y ella, en el piso inferior; además se daban otros hechos anejos a la selección y a la decisión que esta imagen creada por la propia Maggie exigía, y también anejos a la constante atención que el equilibrio familiar requería. De todas maneras, Maggie jamás se había sentido tan absorbida por su matrimonio, tan abyectamente consciente de que había alguien que era el señor de su destino. Americo podía hacer lo que quisiera con ella, como en realidad lo estaba haciendo. «Lo que quisiera», lo que realmente quisiera, aun cuando esta última concreción quizá escapase, en el esplendor de la alta armonía, al análisis y a las menciones nominales. A Maggie le bastaba con reconocer que, fuera lo que fuese lo que el Príncipe deseara, lo conseguiría con absoluta certeza. Por el momento, Maggie sabía sin lugar a dudas y con la más plena sumisión que el Príncipe podía provocar en ella, con apenas una insinuación, estremecimientos de sublime ternura. Si él había regresado fatigado, fatigado después de las actividades desarrolladas en un día tan duro, era preciso tener en cuenta que dichos esfuerzos fueron hechos en beneficio del señor Verver y su hija. Maggie se había quedado en casa de su padre, los dos juntos, en paz, con el Principino, con las complicaciones de la vida fuera de su vista, con los latosos alejados, con la amplia tranquilidad hogareña intacta, gracias a que los otros dos defendían su territorio y desafiaban los temporales. Americo jamás se quejaba y era preciso reconocer que Charlotte tampoco, pero esta noche Maggie tenía la impresión de darse cuenta de las actividades de representación social de Charlotte y Americo, como ellos las concebían; eran de una concepción que superaba todos los conceptos que Maggie pudiera tener al respecto, y tal como tan concienzudamente las llevaban a cabo comportaba vivir en constante tensión. Recordó la vieja frase de Fanny Assingham, la frase en que esta amiga dijo que Maggie y su padre no vivían, y que no sabía qué hacer ni qué se podía hacer en su beneficio. Juntamente con esta frase, a su memoria llegó, como un eco, el recuerdo de la larga conversación que había sostenido con su padre un día de septiembre bajo las copas de los árboles en Fawns, durante la cual le repitió la frase de Fanny.

Aquella ocasión representó quizá para ellos dos —como ya a menudo había pensado Maggie— el primer paso de una existencia más inteligentemente ordenada. Había sido una hora con una serie de causas y efectos encadenados y perfectamente definida y notable. Eran muchas las cosas, y la primera de ellas el matrimonio de su padre, que a juicio de Maggie se habían seguido de la visita de Charlotte a Fawns, visita que había sido consecuencia de la memorable conversación. Pero lo que quizá más destacaba a la luz de

estas concatenaciones era que, desde todos los puntos de vista, parecía que Charlotte hubiera sido llamada en su ayuda, puesto que los dos habían prestado oídos a quien les dijo que si el carruaje familiar se bamboleaba y se atascaba se debía a que faltaba un complemento a sus ruedas. Sí, aquel carruaje parecía tener sólo tres ruedas, por lo que necesitaba otra ¿y qué había hecho Charlotte desde el primer momento en aquella casa, sino comportarse suave y bellamente como una cuarta rueda? Inmediatamente, nada había quedado tan de manifiesto como la mayor gracia de los movimientos del vehículo. Completando su propia imagen, Maggie se daba cuenta ahora con claridad suprema de que a partir de entonces había quedado liberada de todo el peso y tensión que aquel vehículo otrora proyectara en ella. En la medida en que era una de las cuatro ruedas, lo único que tenía que hacer era mantenerse en su sitio, pues otros hacían el trabajo que a ella correspondía, por lo que no sentía peso alguno; tampoco podía decir que fuera un esfuerzo excesivo saber cuándo tenía que girar. Maggie quedó largo rato inmóvil ante el fuego; durante este tiempo pareció que examinara con intensidad la proyección de su propia imagen, y que incluso tuviera conciencia de que había tomado una forma fantásticamente absurda. Parecía que contemplara el paso del carruaje familiar y advirtiera que Americo y Charlotte lo arrastraban, en tanto que su padre y ella ni siquiera lo empujaban. En realidad, su padre y ella iban juntos dentro del carruaje meciendo al Principino, y sosteniéndolo junto a las ventanillas para que viera el paisaje y para que le vieran en el interior, como a un verdadero príncipe heredero de una familia real. El esfuerzo lo hacían íntegramente los otros dos. Esta imagen constituía para ella un reiterado reto, y una y otra vez se detuvo ante el fuego. Después de esto, al igual que la persona que de repente queda bajo una fuerte luz, Maggie se ponía de nuevo en movimiento. Por fin, se había visto a sí misma en la imagen que ahora estudiaba en trance de apearse bruscamente del carruaje. En este momento, y ante la sorpresa de dicha visión, se le dilataron los ojos, y el corazón le dio un vuelco. Contemplaba a la persona que bajaba del carruaje como si fuera otra distinta a ella y esperaba expectante lo que a continuación ocurriría. Aquella persona había tomado una decisión, lo cual se debía a que un impulso que se había estado forjando durante largo tiempo había sido sometido a una presión más recia y súbita. Pero ¿cómo se aplicaría aquella decisión?, ¿qué haría, concretamente, aquella figura de la imagen? Impulsada por estos interrogantes, miró a su alrededor desde el centro de la estancia, como si aquel lugar, exactamente aquél, fuera el terreno de lo que la preocupaba. Cuando la puerta volvió a abrirse, Maggie advirtió, abstracción hecha del suceso en sí, que se le deparaba una primera oportunidad. Su marido había reaparecido, estaba ante ella reposado, casi radiante, impartiéndole confianza. Vestido, acicalado, fragante, dispuesto sobre todo a iniciar la cena. El Príncipe sonrió a Maggie como si con ello diera por terminada la preocupación por su demora. Parecía que la primera oportunidad de ella dependiera de las apariencias de Americo, y ahora comprobaba que estas apariencias eran buenas. Durante unos instantes todavía hubo un poco de desorientación, pero se disipó más rápidamente que en la primera entrada de Americo, porque ahora ya tenía a Maggie en sus brazos.

Después, durante horas y horas, Maggie tuvo la impresión de haber sido elevada, de estar flotando llevada por una cálida corriente en cuyas aguas se habían hundido bloques de cemento que quedaban fuera de la vista. Esto se debía, una vez más, a que Maggie tenía confianza en sí misma y, como ella creía, a que sabía lo que debía hacer. Durante todo el día siguiente, y al otro también, tuvo la impresión de saberlo. Tenía un proyecto y se gozaba en él, y había concebido el proyecto a la luz que bruscamente iluminó sus inquietas meditaciones, marcando así el punto de desenlace de aquellos desvelos. El proyecto se le ocurrió como consecuencia de un interrogante: «¿Y si resulta que los he abandonado? ¿Y si resulta que he aceptado de manera excesivamente pasiva la extraña forma de nuestro vivir?». Maggie iniciaría un proceso concebido por ella que la haría comportarse de manera diferente en su trato con Charlotte y Americo, un proceso totalmente independiente de cualquier otro que pudieran seguir aquellos dos. Bastó con que esta solución se le ocurriera, para que gracias a su sencillez quedara impresionada, encantada; era de una sencillez ventajosa, pero que en su ceguera no había percibido durante largo tiempo; entretanto, las ventajas que ofrecía habían comenzado a quedar demostradas por el éxito que con ella estaba alcanzando. Le había bastado con actuar un poco para comprobar que inmediatamente conseguía resultados. Esta conciencia de los resultados logrados ante su esposo constituyó la ola que la elevó y que la sostuvo en alto. Él había «ido a su encuentro», como se dijo a sí misma, y lo había hecho con generosidad y alegría, principalmente al regresar dispuesto para la cena; Maggie lo guardó en su pecho como la demostración de que los dos habían escapado de algo un tanto indefinido, pero que evidentemente no era tan bueno como la realidad en que se hallaban. Entonces, en aquel instante, su proyecto comenzó a dar resultados. En el momento en que Americo reapareció esplendente, Maggie se hallaba en trance de cosechar su proyecto del mismísimo

corazón de su ansiedad, de arrancarlo del jardín del pensamiento, cual si se tratara de una flor plenamente abierta que pudiera ofrecerle en aquel instante. Sí, se trataba de la flor de la participación y, como tal, allí y entonces, la ofreció a Americo poniendo inmediatamente en práctica la idea, tan innecesaria y oscuramente velada, de compartir con él los goces, las experiencias y los intereses, y de compartirlos asimismo con Charlotte.

Durante la cena, Maggie se interesó ávidamente por todos los detalles de la reciente aventura de su marido y su madrastra, dándole a entender, sin reserva alguna, que deseaba que se lo contara todo, y haciendo de Charlotte, en especial, objeto de interminables preguntas: sobre los juicios que Charlotte había formulado de Matcham, el aspecto externo de Charlotte, sus éxitos, los efectos notables producidos por ella, sus ropas inimitablemente lucidas, su inteligencia tan elegantemente esgrimida, su utilidad social tan brillantemente ejercida. Además Maggie, en su interrogatorio, se mostró principalmente identificada con la feliz idea de ir a visitar catedrales, alegrándose en gran manera de que se les hubiera ocurrido, y de cuyos placenteros resultados, incluso hasta del plato de buey frío y del pan con queso, del extraño mal olor y del sucio mantel de la posada, Americo la informó con buen humor. El Príncipe la miró desde el otro lado de la mesa más de una vez, como si hubiera quedado conmovido por la humildad con que eran bien recibidas estas impresiones de segunda mano, esas diversiones y esas amplias libertades que solamente eran ajenas, como si percibiera en esta bienvenida una calidad exquisita, y, al final, mientras se encontraban solos, antes de que Maggie llamara a un criado, Americo había vuelto a condonar la pequeña irregularidad, si así cabía llamarla, a que Maggie se había aventurado. Se habían levantado de la mesa al mismo tiempo para subir al piso superior; por fin, Americo había hablado de algunas personas de las que estuvieron presentes; las últimas de las que habló fueron lady Castledean y el señor Blint, y después Maggie volvió a abordar el tema del «tipo» de Gloucester. Esto provocó, en el momento en que Americo daba la vuelta a la mesa para ponerse a su lado, que le dirigiera otra de sus amables y penetrantes miradas, una de aquellas miradas encandiladas, pero al mismo tiempo en modo alguno invisiblemente intrigadas, con las que había ya expresado la impresión que le causaba la encantadora gracia de la curiosidad de Maggie. Pareció que fuera a decir, de un momento a otro: «No hace falta, querida, que finjas con tanto entusiasmo, no creo que sea necesario que muestres tanto interés». Fue como si estuviera de pie ante ella, con su fácil comprensión, con un íntimo poder de tranquilización, y con estas palabras en sus labios. La contestación de Maggie hubiera sido inmediata, diciéndole que no fingía. Maggie miraba, alzada la vista, a Americo, que le tenía la mano cogida, y en su mirada había la perseverancia, la verdadera insistencia, aneja a su proyecto. Maggie quería que su esposo comprendiera desde aquel mismo instante que ella iba a estar de nuevo con él, totalmente con ellos, juntos, como indudablemente no lo había estado desde los «extraños» cambios —sólo de esta manera cabía calificarlos— que cada uno de ellos, en beneficio de los demás, había efectuado con excesiva facilidad y presteza. Habían dado por supuesto, pero quizá en exceso, que su vida en común exigía una «forma» especial, a lo cual nada había que objetar siempre y cuando la forma se mantuviera únicamente ante el mundo exterior y no constituyera más que la linda costra de un pastel helado, o algo parecido, que nadie duda en romper con la cucharilla para poder comer el pastel. Para comenzar, Maggie se había permitido observar lo anterior, y quería que Americo comprendiera que su proyecto abarcaba también a Charlotte, de modo que si él hubiera expresado realmente aquella aceptación que Maggie pensaba que estaba a punto de manifestar —la aceptación de la valerosa idea concebida por ella— se hubiera sentido dotada de una facilidad de palabra rayana en la elocuencia.

Sin embargo, mientras esperaba lo anterior, Maggie se dio cuenta de que se hallaba ante un proceso que se desarrollaba en el pensamiento de Americo más profundo de lo que la ocasión globalmente considerada exigía, un proceso de sopesar algo, de considerar, de decidir, de prescindir. Americo había adivinado que Maggie tenía una idea, y que su comportamiento era consecuencia de esta idea, pero se daba la rara circunstancia de que este conocimiento era precisamente lo que refrenaba sus palabras. Maggie lo comprendió porque él la miraba ahora todavía con más fijeza de lo que lo había hecho anteriormente, lo cual casi motivó, faltando poquísimo para que así fuera, que dudara de si Americo habría comprendido correctamente la idea que ella albergaba. Hemos empleado el término «casi», debido a que Americo tenía en las suyas las manos de Maggie, y estaba inclinado hacia ella dulcemente como si quisiera ver o comprender más, o quizá como si quisiera entregarse más; Maggie no comprendía con certeza, y esto le producía sencillamente el efecto de dejarla en poder de Americo, como ella diría. Renunció, se olvidó de su idea, se olvidó de todo, únicamente se dio cuenta de que él volvía a tomarla en sus brazos. Hasta después, Maggie no analizó lo acontecido, no se dio cuenta de que para Americo aquella actuación sustituía las palabras que

no había pronunciado, y que al parecer surtía mejores efectos que cuantas palabras pronunciara, que, en todo momento, en realidad producía mejores efectos que ninguna otra cosa. Después, de una forma inevitable Maggie comprendió que aceptar el comportamiento de su esposo y su reacción equivalía a aceptar virtualmente la presunción, así expresada por él, de que nada había que aquella demostración no previera y no solucionara, y que además el resorte que había actuado en el interior de Maggie bien podía ser, más que cualquier otra cosa, el impulso que legítimamente provocaba la demostración. Fuera lo que fuese, era la tercera vez, desde su regreso, que Americo la apretaba contra su pecho; ahora, manteniéndola a su lado, salió del comedor y ambos penetraron en la antesala, la cruzaron y juntos iniciaron el lento regreso a sus habitaciones en el piso superior. Americo había estado en lo cierto en lo tocante a la oportunidad de su ternura y al grado de sensibilidad de Maggie, pero incluso mientras se daba cuenta de que esta verdad barría todas las demás, ella experimentaba una especie de terror ante la debilidad que en ella provocaba. Comprendía también que tenía el deber de actuar, y que esta actuación requería que no fuese débil, sino, al contrario, bastante fuerte. Sin embargo, durante muchas horas siguió en estado de debilidad, si es que debilidad se le podía llamar, aun cuando manteniendo firmemente la fe en la teoría de su éxito; a fin de cuentas, su agitada iniciativa había sido inconfundiblemente aceptada.

Sin embargo, Maggie tardó poco en darse cuenta de que con esta actuación no se había ocupado de Charlotte, a quien siempre sería preciso no dejar de lado; de todas maneras, Charlotte, por mucho que aprobara sus iniciativas, las aceptaría forzosamente siempre, en el mejor de los casos, de una manera más o menos diferente. Maggie calculó este hecho inevitable, calculó las diferentes actitudes que Charlotte podía adoptar, al día siguiente de volver de Matcham, al abordarla mostrando el mismo interés por oír su relato sobre lo ocurrido. Maggie quería que Charlotte le contara la historia entera, como antes había querido que lo hiciera su marido, y en Eaton Square, adonde fue casi ostentosamente sin el Príncipe, a este fin y sólo a este fin, indujo con urgencia a Charlotte a tratar el tema reiteradamente, ya en presencia del marido de Charlotte, ya durante diversos momentos de conversación a solas con ella. De una forma instintiva, Maggie presupuso que el interés mostrado por su padre, cuando estuvo presente, por los amenos ecos de la visita a Matcham no era menor que el suyo propio, aunque haciendo gracia de cuanto la esposa de su padre le hubiera dicho ya a éste en las charlas que los dos hubieran podido sostener desde la noche anterior. Llevada por el deseo de poner en práctica su proyecto, Maggie se reunió con ellos después del almuerzo, en el momento en que todavía no habían abandonado la estancia en que solían desayunarse, escenario también de su comida del mediodía; en presencia de su padre habló de la posibilidad de haberse perdido algo del relato de la visita por su tardanza en reunirse con Charlotte, y expresó la esperanza de que quizá hubiera todavía alguna anécdota que ignorase. Charlotte iba ya vestida para salir de casa y, a juzgar por las apariencias, su marido estaba dispuesto a no salir. El señor Verver se había levantado de la mesa, y se sentó cerca del fuego con dos o tres diarios matutinos y el resto de la segunda y tercera entrega del correo en una mesita, en donde según pudo comprobar Maggie con una sola mirada, había más abundancia de la usual de circulares, catálogos, anuncios de ventas, sobres y grafías extranjeros que eran tan inconfundibles como las ropas extranjeras. Charlotte, junto a la ventana, miraba la calle lateral que desembocaba en la plaza, y causaba la impresión de haber estado esperando la llegada de Maggie antes de irse. A la luz extraña y colorista, como la de un cuadro, que determinaba las impresiones que Maggie recibía, los objetos adquirían apariencias que hasta el momento no habían revestido plenamente. Esto era consecuencia de su reavivada sensibilidad. Ella sabía que de nuevo se encontraba ante un problema que se hallaba en la necesidad de una solución, en cuya búsqueda debía trabajar intensamente. Esta conciencia, nacida recientemente en ella, quedaba anulada algunas veces como había ocurrido en la noche anterior, pero se había reavivado rápidamente en cuanto salió de su casa, y después de cruzar a pie media ciudad —había venido caminando desde Portland Place— se dio cuenta de que tal conciencia no había perdido fuerza, ni mucho menos.

La conciencia exhaló el aliento en forma de suspiro débil, inaudible, que era el tributo que Maggie rendía allí de pie, antes de hablar, a unas realidades que se percibían a través de la dorada niebla que ya había comenzado a disiparse. Durante unos momentos, las circunstancias en que Maggie se hallaba habían sido vencidas, y mucho, por la dorada niebla, a pesar de que ésta se había debilitado; pero ahora aquellas circunstancias volvían a estar allí claramente definidas; durante el cuarto de hora siguiente, tuvo la impresión de poder contarlas una a una con los dedos. Sobre todas ellas destacaba claramente el renovado testimonio de muchas aceptaciones de su padre, aceptaciones que Maggie durante largo tiempo había considerado de la misma naturaleza que las suyas; pero ahora, de forma indubitable, presentaban el problema de tener que ser tratadas por separado. Por el momento las aceptaciones de su padre todavía no le

parecían extraordinarias, y esto era la causa de que las amontonara junto a las suyas propias, ya que la calificación que a estas últimas había dado Maggie no había comenzado a cambiar hasta hacía muy poco. Sin embargo, Maggie se dio cuenta inmediatamente de que no podía expresar el nuevo juicio que sus aprobaciones le merecían sin suscitar de alguna manera la atención de su padre, sin provocar quizá su sorpresa e imponer con ello un cambio en la situación que con él compartía. Las imágenes concretas le recordaron en tono de advertencia lo anterior, y durante unos instantes el rostro de Charlotte, mirándola de frente, le causó la impresión de que buscara su propio rostro para hallar en él la expresión de aquel recuerdo y advertencias. No por ello Maggie había besado a su madrastra con menos presteza, y luego se había inclinado sobre su padre, por la espalda, ofreciéndole la mejilla, pequeños y amables formulismos que acompañaban el trámite fácil de relevo de guardia, dicho sea con las palabras que Charlotte empleaba a menudo, siempre alegremente, como término de comparación de aquel proceso de sustitución. En consecuencia, Maggie representaba el papel de centinela entrante, y la costumbre había suavizado de tal manera este relevo, que la compañera de armas de Maggie hubiera podido irse, en esta ocasión, después de aceptar la contraseña, sin incurrir en una conversación irrelevante y, en sentido estricto, poco militar. Sin embargo, no fue esto lo que ocurrió. De la misma manera que nuestra joven amiga se sintió elevada y flotando sobre su primer impulso de romper mediante un solo golpe el hechizo, sólo tardó un segundo en dar la nota, fuera cual fuese el riesgo, que había estado ensayando en su casa. Había ensayado aquella nota la noche anterior durante la cena ante Americo, y sabía todavía mejor la manera en que tenía que comenzar su actuación para con la señora Verver, ayudando en gran manera a Maggie el poder comenzar a hablar diciendo que el Príncipe había avivado antes su curiosidad que la había satisfecho. Franca y alegremente había acudido para preguntar, para preguntar lo que habían conseguido aquellos dos en su insólitamente prolongada campaña. Maggie reconoció que había sonsacado a su marido cuanto había podido, pero los maridos no son las personas que mejor suelen contestar preguntas de esta clase. Americo sólo había conseguido acrecentar la curiosidad de Maggie, por esto había ido a primera hora a fin de perderse lo menos posible del relato que Charlotte hiciera. Maggie dijo:

—Papá, las esposas siempre informan mucho mejor que los maridos.

Dirigiéndose a Charlotte, añadió:

—Sin embargo, reconozco que los padres no son mucho mejores que los maridos a este respecto.

Sonriendo, dijo:

—Jamás me dice más de la décima parte de lo que tú le cuentas. En consecuencia, espero que aún no se lo hayas contado todo; si es así, seguramente me habré perdido lo mejor.

Maggie siguió hablando, siguió y se sintió arrastrada a hacerlo. Tenía la impresión de ser como una actriz que ha estudiado y ensayado su papel, pero que en escena, ante las candilejas, comienza de repente a improvisar, a decir frases que no están en el texto de la obra. Era precisamente la impresión que el escenario y las candilejas le causaban lo que la mantenía en vilo, lo que la hacía elevarse más; lo era también la sensación de actuación que toda plataforma lógicamente comporta, actuación que en su caso era la primera de su vida, o mejor dicho, si contamos la de la noche anterior, la segunda. Durante tres o cuatro días, esta plataforma siguió estando perceptiblemente bajo los pies de Maggie, quien en todo momento gozó de la inspiración para improvisar en forma harto notable y heroica. La preparación y la práctica no habían sido totalmente suficientes, por lo que el papel de Maggie, al ampliarse más y más, la obligaba a inventarse de un momento a otro lo que debía decir y lo que debía hacer. En su arte, Maggie sólo disponía de una norma: no rebasar sus propios límites y no perder la cabeza. Al cabo de una semana podría ver ciertamente a qué punto había llegado. En su excitación se decía que lo que se proponía era sencillísimo. Se trataba de imponer un cambio, golpe a golpe, sin permitir que ninguno de los tres, y menos su padre, llegara a sospechar siquiera la existencia de la mano que efectuaba el cambio. Si entraban en sospechas, preguntarían cuál era la razón de aquel intento de cambio, y la humillante verdad era que Maggie no tenía razón alguna que ofrecer, es decir, no tenía una razón que pudiera calificar de razonable. Instintivamente, estimaba con nobleza que durante toda su vida, al lado de su padre, y siguiendo su ejemplo, sólo había esgrimido motivos razonables, y le avergonzaría en grado sumo esgrimir ante su propio padre motivos que fueran inferiores sustituciones de aquellos otras. Mientras no se hallara en situación de alegar claramente que sentía celos, no se hallaría en situación de alegar honestamente que se sentía insatisfecha. Esta condición sería necesaria concomitancia de la primera, y sin el apoyo de ésta la otra se derrumbaría forzosamente. Por fortuna, así había quedado planteado el juego para Maggie. Podía esgrimir una carta, sólo una, y esgrimir la que implicaba dar fin al juego. Tenía la impresión de ser la pareja de su padre en aquel juego y de estar sentada

a la mesita rectangular de verde tapete, entre los altos candelabros de plata vieja y las bien ordenadas fichas. Maggie recordaba constantemente que formular una pregunta, suscitar una duda, comentar de cualquier forma la manera de jugar los otros jugadores significaría romper el hechizo. Sí, hechizo tenía que llamarlo, pues hechizo era lo que mantenía a su compañero tan constantemente ocupado, tan perpetuamente saciado, tan satisfecho en todo. En el caso de Maggie, decir algo equivalía a tener que decir que sentía celos. En las horas en que estaba sola, contemplaba con mirada vaga, largamente, semejante imposibilidad.

Al término de la semana, de aquella semana que había comenzado tan de mañana en Eaton Square entre su padre y Charlotte, la sensación que Maggie tenía de ser maravillosamente tratada había llegado a tener más fuerza que cualquier otra. Y debo añadir, además, que se descubrió a sí misma en trance de preguntarse qué otra sensación podía ser más avasalladora que la que sentía. Maggie sabía muy bien que la reacción de Charlotte a la prueba de estar más en su compañía debía dar al experimento la marca del triunfo; si el triunfo causaba la impresión de ser una ganancia inferior a su imagen originaria, precisamente por ello entrañaba cierta analogía con el regusto que en nuestra joven amiga dejaron las manifestaciones provocadas en Americo. En realidad, Maggie conservó más de un regusto, y si antes he hablado de las impresiones que recibió cuando de tan insidiosa forma bajó a la palestra, clara nota debo dar de lo que percibió durante aquellos momentos de la inmediata incertidumbre de Charlotte. Maggie había dado muestras, sin la menor duda, ya que no podía dejar de darla, de que había llegado animada por una idea, exactamente igual que la noche anterior había esperado a su marido, animada por un sentimiento. Esta analogía entre las dos situaciones mantendría en su mente el recuerdo del parecido existente en las expresiones de los dos rostros, de cuyos extremos lo único que Maggie podía dar por seguro era que había producido los mismos efectos en los dos o, mejor dicho, en la sensibilidad de cada uno, tan maravillosamente cubierta. El mero hecho de efectuar esta comparación significaba para Maggie recordarla una y otra vez, meditar acerca de ella, extraer las últimas gotas de significado; en resumen, jugar con ella nerviosa, vaga e incesantemente, como hubiera podido jugar con un medallón con sendos retratos en una y otra cara que llevara suspendido del cuello mediante una cadenilla de oro de tan firme delicadeza que no hubiera esfuerzo que pudiera romperla. Los retratos en miniatura se hallaban espalda contra espalda, pero Maggie los veía siempre de frente, y cuando pasaba la vista del uno al otro, veía en los ojos de Charlotte el destello momentáneo: «¿Qué desea Maggie, en realidad?», que había aparecido y desaparecido ante ella en los ojos del Príncipe. Y también veía la otra luz, la luz que se transformó en un resplandor, tanto en Portland Place como en Eaton Square, tan pronto reveló que no quería causar daño, es decir, que no quería causar a Charlotte daño mayor que el de hacerle comprender que deseaba salir con ella. Maggie había estado presente en este proceso de una forma tan personal como hubiera podido estar presente en cualquier acto doméstico, como el de colgar un nuevo cuadro o probar al Principino sus primeros pantalones.

De esta manera Maggie siguió presente durante toda la semana, ya que la señora Verver le dio sistemáticamente y encantadoramente la bienvenida. Charlotte parecía haber esperado aquella insinuación por parte de Maggie. ¿Y qué fue, a fin de cuentas, sino una insinuación la que vio en el curso de la tranquila pero imborrable conversación en el comedor del desayuno, que Charlotte aceptaba? Y además, no la había aceptado con resignación o con matices de reserva, por amables que fueran; la había aceptado con avidez, con gratitud, con una graciosa gentileza que sustituía las explicaciones. La generosidad de este acuerdo hubiera podido hacer parecer muy bien que se daba cuenta de la situación, como si la Princesa hubiera quedado calificada de mujer mudable y, en consecuencia, sometida únicamente a las normas de un tacto que aceptaba estos caprichos como ley. En realidad, el capricho dominante consistía en que la llegada de una de las dos señoras a un sitio, fuera el que fuese, era el infalible anuncio de la llegada de la otra hasta que el acuerdo dejara de estar vigente. En ricos colores quedó expresado en la esplendente faz de este período que la señora Verver únicamente deseaba saber, en todas las ocasiones, qué se deseaba de ella, y estaba siempre dispuesta a recibir instrucciones, a fin de mejorarlas si ello era posible. Nuestras dos jóvenes amigas volvieron a ser, mientras duró este período, las compañeras que fueron en otros tiempos, las compañeras de los tiempos de las prolongadas visitas de Charlotte a Maggie, la amiga colmada de riquezas que tanto la admiraba, las compañeras de los tiempos en que la igualdad de condiciones era, para las dos, resultado de la innata ignorancia de Maggie, en lo tocante a sus ventajas. Los elementos anteriores volvieron a cobrar vida; volvieron a cobrar vida la frecuencia, la intimidad, el énfasis de las expresiones concomitantes, la apreciación, el cariño, la confianza, el insólito encanto que a cada una de las dos producía esta activa contribución a la felicidad de la otra, todo ello mejorado —mejorado o matizado, ¿quién sabe?—

por una nueva nota de diplomacia, casi de ansiedad, de intensidad en la observación, que se advertía levemente en el caso de Charlotte, en la cuestión de llamada y respuesta, en la cuestión de hacer lo posible para que la Princesa quedara libre de preocupaciones y satisfecha, que parecía un intento de volver a jugar con más refinamiento a la disparidad de la relación. En pocas palabras, el comportamiento de Charlotte tenía momentos en que florecía en excesos de amable cortesía, en actos de paso a segundo término en presencia de otra gente, en súbitos formalismos de menor importancia encaminados a sugerir y a reconocer, que bien hubieran podido ser fruto de su sentido del deber de «no perder de vista» las diferencias y distinciones sociales. Maggie se daba cuenta de esto con más claridad en los momentos en que quedaba a solas con ella y en los que la inveterada costumbre de su amiga de no pasar jamás antes que ella por una puerta, de no sentarse jamás si ella no estaba sentada, de no hablar hasta el momento en que parecía concederle licencia, de no olvidar, dejándose llevar por un exceso de familiaridad, que Maggie era mujer dotada de sensibilidad además de ser importante, producía el efecto de arrojar sobre sus relaciones una especie de argentino tejido de decoro. Se extendía sobre sus cabezas como un protocolario dosel, como el recuerdo de que, a pesar de que la dama de compañía tenía el carácter de favorita reconocida que estaba segura en su posición, era como una pequeña reina y era perfectamente capaz de recordarlo, con la más leve advertencia.

Otra de las realidades que eran anejas a este éxito febril consistía en la creencia de que en otro terreno las cosas quedaban también facilitadas. La presteza de Charlotte en complacer a Maggie había tenido, en cierto sentido y quizá de manera levemente excesiva, el carácter de una intervención, y había comenzado a reabsorber a Maggie en el preciso momento en que el marido de ésta le daba muestras de que para estar íntegramente presente, valga la expresión, sólo necesitaba que le insinuasen claramente que así se deseaba. Maggie le había oído hablar de esa «clara insinuación» en los momentos en que Americo se divertía examinando los giros y los modismos de la lengua inglesa, en las notables exhibiciones de su capacidad de asimilación, capacidad digna de más altos empeños y mejores causas. El Príncipe, en el momento oportuno, había aceptado las insinuaciones de Maggie de una manera que, en los primeros momentos del resplandor del alivio, había inducido a Charlotte a creer que el breve intervalo que había aguardado había sido en realidad prolongado. Sin embargo, inmediatamente después, se produjo un reajuste superficial de las relaciones en el que Maggie quedaba una vez más un poco sacrificada. Ésta se había dicho: «Debo hacerlo todo sin que papá vea lo que hago, por lo menos hasta el momento en que ya lo haya hecho». Pero ignoraba, y siguió ignorándolo durante los días siguientes, qué iba a hacer con el fin de desorientar o cegar a aquel partícipe de su vivir. Lo que en realidad no tardó en ocurrir, como tuvo que reconocer, fue que, si bien es cierto que su madrastra había tomado posesión de ella noblemente y que por tanto la había arrancado virtualmente del lado de su marido, tampoco cabía negar, por otra parte, que ello había comportado tras un breve período momentos encantadores de estancia en la casa de Eaton Square. Cuando Maggie iba a casa de su padre y de Charlotte, después de cualquier feliz demostración efectuada ante la sociedad en la que al parecer vivían de que no había razón alguna que abonara el que su íntima amistad no fuera pública y merecedora de aplauso, casi siempre se encontraba con que Americo o había acudido para conversar con su suegro antes de la llegada de las dos señoras, o hacía unas demostraciones junto a su suegro de la fácil armonía que reinaba en la vida familiar, equivalentes en su significado a las salidas que Maggie hacía en compañía de Charlotte. Esta concreta impresión era la causa de que en el interior de Maggie todo se fundiera y quedara reducido a trizas, es decir, todo lo que tendía a poner en entredicho la perfección del común vivir de los cuatro. Cierto es que este particular cariz de la situación los dividía de nuevo, los volvía a separar en parejas y grupos, exactamente como si el sentido del equilibrio fuese lo que tuviera más capacidad de persistencia entre ellos, exactamente como si el propio Americo también pensara y vigilara dicho equilibrio sin cesar. Pero, en compensación, Americo conseguía que el padre de Maggie no echara en falta a ésta, y difícilmente hubiera podido rendir mejor servicio a todos ellos. Dicho en pocas palabras: Americo actuaba siguiendo una consigna, consigna de la que se había enterado mediante la observación.

Al Príncipe le había bastado con percibir un matiz de cambio en el comportamiento de Maggie. Y su instinto, en lo tocante a las relaciones entre seres humanos, instinto que era el más exquisito que quepa concebir, le indujo inmediatamente a adaptarse y a tomar en sus manos el timón del cambio. Maggie volvía a darse cuenta de lo que significaba estar casada con un hombre que era un caballero en grado sublime, por lo que, a pesar de no desear verter todas la delicadezas de su relación con Americo en la vulgaridad de una conversación, una y otra vez se hallaba a sí misma en Portland Place en trance de decir: «Si no te amara por

ti mismo, ¿sabes?, te amaría por él». Después de decir Maggie frases como ésta, el Príncipe la miraba de la misma manera que la miraba Charlotte en Eaton Square cuando Maggie le recordaba la bondad del Príncipe, a través de la niebla de una casi pensativa sonrisa que estimaba que la prodigalidad de Maggie, pese a ser inofensiva, era una característica que debía tenerse en cuenta. Sometida a esta presión, Charlotte quizá se hallara al borde de decir: «Mi querida Maggie, es que la gente buena es así siempre, por lo que no debes sorprenderte. Todos nosotros somos buenos, ¿por qué no vamos a serlo? Si no lo hubiéramos sido no habríamos llegado tan lejos, porque estimo que hemos llegado muy lejos realmente. ¿Por qué has de portarte como si tú no fueras un perfecto encanto, capaz del más dulce comportamiento? Como si en realidad no hubieras crecido en ese ambiente, ese ambiente formado por tanta bondad que yo tuve ocasión de advertir, incluso en los viejos tiempos, tan pronto te traté de cerca, y que ahora me habéis permitido entre todos hacer mío». La señora Verver bien habría podido hacer otra aseveración encantadoramente natural en ella, como esposa agradecida e irreprochable. «También podría recordarte cuán maravilloso es que a tu marido, siempre que tiene oportunidad para ello, nada le parece mejor que estar en compañía del mío. Sé lo mucho que vale mi marido, querida, y comprendo perfectamente que su trato merece ser cultivado, y que su compañía es un placer.» Observaciones tan felizmente provocadas en Charlotte como las consignadas habían estado en el aire pero, tal como hemos visto, también estaba en el aire para nuestras jóvenes amigas, a modo de emanación surgida del mismo origen, una destilada diferencia cuyo esencial principio imponía reprimir las objeciones y las contradicciones. Esta impresión siempre reaparecía en determinados momentos, hasta el punto de parecer que tenía sus horas fijas de hacerlo. Y quizá ello nos interese por cuanto provocó en Maggie una última reflexión, una reflexión por la que apareció ante ella una luz, como una gran flor que se hubiera abierto en el curso de una noche. Tan pronto como esta luz se hubo extendido un poco, iluminó con sorprendente claridad ciertas zonas e indujo a Maggie a preguntarse bruscamente por qué hubo cierta oscuridad allí aunque sólo fuera durante tres días. Decididamente, la perfección de su éxito era como una extraña playa a la que silenciosamente había sido remolcada, y en la que, sobresaltada, se echó a temblar ante la idea de que el buque que la había llevado hubiérase hecho de nuevo a la mar, dejándola allí sola. La palabra para expresarlo, la palabra que había encendido la luz era tratamiento, le estaban haciendo objeto de un tratamiento; procedían ante ella y también ante su padre, de acuerdo con un plan que era la justa réplica al suyo propio. Y no seguían la consigna dada por ella —y esto era lo que ponía alerta a Maggie—, sino que seguían la consigna que se daban el uno al otro, y lo hacían como de común acuerdo, con una exacta coincidencia de ideas de forma que, cuando Maggie comenzó a fijar su atención en ello, le pareció tener ante ella la consigna de los dos como recordándole igualdad en el comportamiento, la expresión y el tono. Tenían una misma visión de la situación de Maggie, así como de los posibles juicios que de esta situación pudiera ella adoptar; una visión determinada por el cambio de actitud que los dos, siempre muy sutilmente, tuvieron que notar por fuerza en ella cuando regresaron de Matcham. En este pequeño, pero en modo alguno disimulado cambio, tuvieron que ver un mudo comentario, aun cuando ignoraban sobre qué. Arqueándose sobre la cabeza de la Princesa como una bóveda audaz, estaba ahora el convencimiento de que difícilmente la comunicación entre los dos a este respecto pudo dejar de ser inmediata.

Como hemos dicho, la nueva percepción estaba erizada para Maggie de extrañas sugerencias, al mismo tiempo que nacían y se extinguían interrogantes sin respuesta, como, por ejemplo, por qué motivo semejante prontitud en la armonía tenía que ser importante. Cuando Maggie comenzaba a reconstruir todo lo ocurrido, parte por parte, el proceso adquiría viveza, de manera que parecía que ella se hubiera entregado a recoger menudos y destellantes diamantes en el polvo barrido en su ordenada casa. En este empeño siguió inclinada sobre el cubo que contenía lo barrido, buscando incluso hasta en los últimos restos de su inocente interés. Fue entonces cuando la desechada imagen de Americo, parado en la puerta del *salottino*, mientras le miraban los ojos de Maggie, sentada en la silla ante la puerta, fue entonces, decíamos, cuando este pequeño e inmenso recuerdo ejerció todo su poder. Y ya que de puertas tratamos, diremos que Maggie advirtió después que había cerrado la puerta. Tal como hemos visto, Maggie la cerró conscientemente, quedando dentro ella sola, animada por su sensibilidad, en compañía del pensamiento sobre la reaparición de su esposo y de la plenitud de su presencia. A fin de cuentas, el testimonio prestado por esta realidad superó todos los demás en aquellos momentos, incluso mientras Maggie miraba, ya que la cálida y líquida oleada se había adentrado gran trecho en la playa. Luego, Maggie había vivido durante no sabía cuántas horas bajo un vertiginoso y ardiente encanto, realmente en submarinas profundidades, en donde todo le llegaba a través de muros de esmeralda y de madreperla, aunque sacó la cabeza a la

superficie para respirar cuando volvió a ver a Charlotte, cara a cara, a la mañana siguiente en Eaton Square. Entre tanto, como era evidente, la anterior impresión, la primera impresión había quedado en ella fija, como el criado que espía al otro lado de la puerta cerrada, como un testigo dispuesto en el momento oportuno a ampararse en el más leve pretexto para volver a entrar. Y parecía que este testigo hubiera encontrado tal pretexto en la necesidad que tenía Maggie de comparar, de comparar los evidentes elementos comunes en la forma en que su marido y su madrastra la «trataban» ahora. De todas maneras, con o sin este testigo, la comparación la condujo a notar la intensidad de las ansiosas intenciones que operaban, y que tan armoniosamente operaban, entre su marido y su madrastra. En la medianoche de estas comparaciones percibió la promesa del alba.

Se trataba de un premeditado plan de los dos para no herirla a ella, un plan que les permitía comportarse con gran nobleza, un plan al que por algún medio convincente cada uno de ellos había inducido al otro a operar; en consecuencia, esto demostraba que Maggie había sido objeto de detenido estudio. Después de haber percibido la nota de alarma, rápida, ansiosa y preocupadamente, antes de que sin saberlo pudieran herirla, los dos se comunicaron mediante señales de una casa a la otra la inteligente idea, la idea de la que se había beneficiado durante estos días, la idea de la propia Maggie. Los dos, animados por un mismo propósito, habían cobijado a la Princesa bajo su armazón, y a esto se debía el que sobre su cabeza se arqueara ahora una pesada bóveda. Y allí estaba ahora aposentada en la sólida cámara de su impotencia, como inmersa en un baño de benevolencia arteramente preparado para ella, del que apenas podía sacar la cabeza estirando el cuello para mirar. Nada había que objetar a los baños de benevolencia, sin embargo, salvo cuando uno es un enfermo de determinada clase; a un excéntrico nervioso o a un niño abandonado no se suele sumergirlos en baño alguno a no ser que lo pidan. Y Maggie no lo había pedido. Había agitado sus débiles alas como queriendo expresar su deseo de volar, y no para pedir una jaula todavía más dorada o más terrones de azúcar. A fin de cuentas, Maggie no se había quejado ni siquiera con una sílaba. Por lo tanto, ¿cuál era la herida que había mostrado temor de que le infligieran? ¿Qué herida había recibido realmente que motivara que no intercambiara una palabra con ellos? Si Maggie hubiera gemido o hecho pucheros, hubieran tenido un motivo. Pero así la ahorcaran —Maggie empleaba expresiones fuertes cuando conversaba consigo misma—, su comportamiento no sería absolutamente dulce y aquiescente desde el principio al final. En consecuencia todo tenía que deberse, a fin de cuentas, al procedimiento de los otros dos, que operaban con toda claridad con precaución en la política a seguir. La habían metido en el baño y la necesidad de ser consecuentes consigo mismos —de ser consecuentes el uno con el otro— exigía que la mantuvieran allí.

Hallándose en esta situación, Maggie no podía inmiscuirse en la política de los dos, que era una política acordada y establecida. Sus pensamientos referentes a este tema llegaron a adquirir gran intensidad. Es cierto que el pensamiento de Maggie tenía sus altibajos, pero esto sólo servía para que diera después un mayor paso al frente. Conoció a fondo aquel asunto cuando llegó a la conclusión de que su marido y la aliada de su marido estaban directamente interesados en privarla de libertad de movimientos. Política o no política, los dos eran quienes se habían organizado. Y era preciso mantener a Maggie en una situación que no le permitiera desorganizarlos. Todo encajaba maravillosamente tan pronto como Maggie pudo atribuir a los otros dos un motivo. A pesar de que, a esta alturas, a ella misma le había comenzado a parecer extraño que, hasta el momento, no hubiera podido imaginar que los dos estuvieran animados por un ideal tan diferente al suyo propio. Desde luego, estaban organizados, los cuatro estaban organizados; sin embargo, ¿cuál había sido la base de su vivir, sino la de estar todos organizados? Sí, Americo y Charlotte se habían organizado conjuntamente, pero ella, Maggie, estaba organizada aparte. El pleno sentido de todo lo anterior acudió velozmente a su pensamiento de una manera muy diferente a la de aquella que la arrastró diez días atrás. Y como sea que su padre no parecía apercibirse de la mano vagamente crispada con la que ella había intentado apoyarse al recibir la primera y fuerte impresión, ahora se sentía muy sola.

Capítulo XXVII

Había un proyecto ya antiguo —nacido aproximadamente en las anteriores Navidades— según el cual padre e hija tenían que «hacer algo» divertido los dos juntos; los dos ya lo habían hablado en diversas ocasiones, lo habían alimentado y lo habían puesto en pie, teóricamente, aunque sin permitirse en verdad poner los pies en el suelo. Lo sumo que habían hecho sobre este proyecto fue dar unos cuantos pasos sobre la alfombra de la sala de estar, con gran vigilancia por parte de los dos, sosteniéndolo y protegiéndolo con grandes prevenciones para evitar accidentes y frustraciones. Americo y Charlotte habían asistido siempre a estos ensayos siguiendo el experimento con simpatía y alegría, y jamás aplaudieron con más entusiasmo, como Maggie ahora advirtió, que cuando el proyecto, en pañales todavía, pataleó más alocadamente, pataleó ante todos, pasando el Canal y cruzando medio Continente, pasando luego los Pirineos y, por fin, pronunciando con toda inocencia, casi en un vagido, un sonoro nombre español. En la actualidad, Maggie se preguntaba si realmente su padre y ella creían que deseaban, a fin de correr esta aventura, arrancar unos momentos para sí mismos, o si cualquiera de los dos, en un momento determinado, había considerado que el proyecto significaba realmente la posibilidad no sólo de exhibirlo como un juguete a los otros dos, sino también de irse los dos juntos, sin marido y sin mujer, para echar otra ojeada, «antes de morir», a los cuadros de Madrid, y demorarse un poco más para prestar atención a tres o cuatro posibles adquisiciones, confidencialmente ofrecidas, de rarezas primorosas de las que había tenido noticia fidedigna, que habían sido profusamente fotografiadas, y aún esperaban pacientemente su sigilosa llegada a recónditos lugares de cuya situación no se había dado la clave. Esta visión con la que habían jugueteado durante los más crepusculares días en Eaton Square se había proyectado a dedicar un período de tres o cuatro semanas de primavera a la aventura, tres o cuatro semanas vividas de acuerdo con el espíritu que animaba su vida regularizada, en la medida que esta vida regularizada persistía, pletórica de compartidas mañanas, tardes y noches, de compartidos paseos a pie y en coche, de visitas para «ver» en antiguos lugares, animados por vagas ilusiones, una vida pletórica de manera principal de aquella comprada libertad social, de la sensación de comodidad y crédito anejos a su casa que esencialmente tenía la perfección propia de algo por lo que se ha pagado el precio, pero que «resultaba», globalmente considerado, tan barato que parecía que no costara nada al padre ni a la hija. En la actualidad, Maggie se preguntaba si había sido sincera en lo tocante a aquel viaje, se preguntaba si hubiera sido fiel al proyecto, incluso en el caso de que nada hubiera ocurrido.

El que Maggie ahora considerase imposible seguir fiel al plan quizá nos dé la medida de su convicción de que había ocurrido cuanto podía ocurrir. Se había producido un cambio en su relación con cada uno de sus familiares, y este cambio la había obligado a decirse a sí misma que comportarse como antes lo hacía significaba comportarse, con respecto a Americo y Charlotte, con la más redomada hipocresía. En estos días Maggie estimaba que efectuar con su padre un viaje por países extranjeros equivaldría, sobre todo, tanto por su parte como por la de su padre, a una última expresión de excesiva confianza, ya que el encanto de la idea había partido en realidad de tan sublime concepto. Día tras día, demoraba el momento de «hablar» con su padre y daba a este término muchos significados. Además, se sentía dominada por la extraña aprensión de que fuera su padre quien rompiera el silencio. Maggie le daba tiempo, le dio tiempo durante varios días, le dio tiempo aquella mañana, aquel mediodía, aquella noche, y a la siguiente y a la siguiente y a la siguiente, e incluso llegó a pensar que si su padre seguía sin referirse al proyecto sería prueba concluyente

de que también él se sentía inquieto. De todo ello quizá resultara que se habían dedicado, con gran éxito, a arrojarse tierra a los ojos los unos a los otros, y al final resultaría que todos tendrían que volver la cabeza, debido a que la plateada niebla que los protegía hubiera comenzado a disiparse. Por fin, a últimos de abril, Maggie decidió que si su padre nada decía en el curso de las próximas veinticuatro horas, debería considerar que esto significaba que estaban «perdidos», dicho sea en el particular léxico de Maggie, ya que muy poca sinceridad podía haber en fingir interés por efectuar un viaje a España cuando ya se aproximaba el verano, un verano que prometía ser caluroso. Semejante propuesta en labios de su padre, semejante desorbitado optimismo, representaría su manera de ser consecuente consigo mismo, por cuanto el hecho de que en realidad no deseara moverse, o que su desplazamiento se limitara, en el peor de los casos, a regresar a Fawns, sólo podía significar que su padre no era feliz. Maggie, de todas maneras, averiguó lo que su padre quería y lo que no quería, y lo hizo en el momento preciso para que ello infundiera nueva claridad a su mente. Maggie había cenado con su esposo en la casa de Eaton Square, con motivo de recibir en ella el señor y la señora Verver a lord y lady Castledean. La conveniencia de un acto de este género había sido considerada durante varios días por nuestro grupo, y la cuestión quedó reducida a determinar cuál de los dos hogares debía entrar en liza en primer lugar. El problema quedó fácilmente resuelto, como quedaban todos aquellos que en cierta medida afectaran a Americo y a Charlotte. La iniciativa correspondía evidentemente a la señora Verver, que había ido a Matcham, en tanto que Maggie no había ido, y la velada de Eaton Square bien podía considerarse como una demostración personal por cuanto la cena se había planeado con criterios de «intimidad». Además de los anfitriones de Matcham, sólo seis invitados más formaban el grupo, y cada una de estas personas tenía para Maggie el interés propio de una celebración habida en las celebraciones pascuales en aquella casa legendaria. El recuerdo común de una ocasión que había dejado una imborrable e inefable estela de encanto, ese aire de afectuoso comentario, menos reprimido en los demás que en Americo y Charlotte, les daba una indescifrable camaradería contra la cual la imaginación de nuestra joven amiga se estrellaba como una menuda ola impotente.

Y esto no significaba que Maggie deseara haber participado en la tan recordada fiesta ni ser partícipe de sus secretos, porque tales secretos nada le importaban; en la actualidad, únicamente y de manera absoluta, le preocupaban sus propios secretos. Ocurría sencillamente que Maggie se había dado cuenta, de repente, de la información que necesitaba para sus propios fines, y de la mucha información que podía sonsacar a aquella gente, de una manera u otra, por lo que de repente sintió el deseo de dominar y utilizar a aquella gente, incluso hasta el punto de desafiar, de explotar directamente, posiblemente de gozar, bajo la protección de una perversa hipocresía, del perceptible elemento de curiosidad con que la miraban. Tan pronto como Maggie tuvo conciencia del aleteo de esta última impresión —la irresistible percepción de que ella representaba algo en la extraña experiencia de ellos, de la misma manera que ellos representaban algo para la suya—, su consciente propósito de no dejarlos escapar dejó de conocer límites. Tan pronto como comenzó aquella noche, Maggie siguió adelante y avanzó como había sentido que avanzaba tres semanas antes, aquella mañana en que la visión de su padre y de su esposa, esperándola juntos en el comedor del desayuno, había sido tan decisiva. En esta otra escena, lady Castledean fue quien tuvo el poder de decidir, fue quien encendió la luz, quien prendió el fuego, quien activó los nervios. Lady Castledean no le gustaba a Maggie, según le constaba, a pesar de todas las razones que hubiera en contra, a pesar de los más grandes diamantes en el cabello dorado, a pesar de las más largas pestañas sombreando los más lindos y falsos ojos, a pesar del más antiguo encaje sobre el más violeta terciopelo, a pesar de las más correctas maneras sobre las más erróneas presunciones. Su presunción consistía en tener, en todos los momentos de su vida, todas las ventajas, lo cual la hacía suavemente bella y casi generosa, por lo que no distinguía los menudos ojos protuberantes de los insectos sociales menores, a menudo tan bien dotados, de las otras decorativas protuberancias que cabía ver en sus cuerpos y en sus alas. A Maggie le habían gustado, en Londres y en todo el mundo, las personas que se consideraban con derecho a temer, con derecho incluso a juzgar; tener que reconocer, en aquel caso concreto, la ausencia de todo género de lógica consecuencia tenía la virtud de darle fiebre. En realidad, todo consistía únicamente en que una encantadora e inteligente mujer la miraba con curiosidad, con curiosidad como esposa de Americo; además esta curiosidad estaba animada por un espíritu de amabilidad y de espontaneidad casi sorprendente.

El punto de vista, este punto de vista, era lo que Maggie percibía en la libre contemplación de los ocho. Había en Americo algo que debía explicarse, y Maggie era pasada de mano en mano tierna y hábilmente, como una muñeca vestida correctamente, sostenida por su parte media, prietamente rellena, para que diera una explicación. Oprimiéndole el estómago cabía la posibilidad de que la diera, y parecía que de ella se

esperara que, en rara imitación de la naturaleza, dijera: «Oh, sí, aquí estoy y siempre he estado aquí; también soy, a mi manera, un pequeño hecho real; en principio cuesto mucho dinero, es decir, mis aderezos cuestan a mi padre mucho dinero; por otra parte, impongo a mi marido trabajos encaminados a mi educación que no se pueden pagar con dinero». Maggie podía dar a aquella gente una réplica de esta manera, y tradujo sus ideas en actos después de la cena, antes de que se dispersaran, comprometiéndolos a todos, sin convencionalismos, casi violentamente, a que fueran a cenar a su casa de Portland Place, comprometiéndoles a los mismos que allí estaban, si es que no les molestaba ser los mismos, que era lo que ella quería. Sí, Maggie avanzaba, seguía adelante, y de ello se dio cuenta una vez más. Era algo parecido a haber estornudado diez veces seguidas o a haberse puesto a cantar de repente una canción cómica. Había rupturas en la ilación y habría obstáculos en el proceso. Maggie no veía con claridad qué podía hacer aquella gente en su beneficio, ni la manera en que debía tratarla, pero ya andaba bailando de un lado para otro, bajo la apariencia de un correcto proceder, animada por el pensamiento de que algo había comenzado, tanto le gustaba darse cuenta de que ella era el punto de convergencia de curiosidades. A fin de cuentas, tampoco comportaba que la curiosidad de aquella gente significara gran cosa, la curiosidad de aquellos seis acorralados, a quienes Maggie consideraba, con lúcida consideración, que aún se hallaba en disposición de conducir como si se tratara de un rebaño de corderos. La intensidad de la conciencia de Maggie, su penetrante sabor, derivada de que ella había conseguido atraer, capturar, cual aquella gente decía, la atención de Americo y de Charlotte, a ninguno de los cuales Maggie había mirado siquiera en ningún momento. En realidad, Maggie había mezclado a éstos con los otros seis. Con el paso del tiempo Americo y Charlotte perdieron el contacto con su función; dicho en pocas palabras: impresionados y sorprendidos, abandonaron sus puestos. En el fondo de su ser, Maggie se decía: «¡Han quedado paralizados, paralizados!». Hasta este punto ayudaba a dar coherencia a las percepciones de Maggie el hecho de que ambos estuviesen desorientados.

Con ello vemos que la apariencia, en el caso de Maggie, no guardaba la debida proporción con las causas. Pero, de una manera esporádica, ella pensaba que si conseguía captar correctamente las apariencias, si conseguía situarlas en el lugar que les correspondía, las razones agazapadas detrás de ellas, las razones inciertas a la vista, debido a su naturaleza cambiante, quizá quedaran de relieve. Y no consistía todo en que el Príncipe y la señora Verver se maravillaran al ver que Maggie se comportaba cortésmente con sus amigos, sino en todo lo contrario, en que no era cortés su comportamiento, ya que se había apartado de la costumbre de ser delicada en la propuesta, propuesta efectuada mediante la sugerencia del condicional «si», mediante la aceptada vaguedad que habría permitido a aquella gente frustrar sus propósitos caso de que hubieran querido. La razón de su plan, la fuente de aquella violencia que estaba plenamente dispuesta a desatar, consistía en que era aquella gente ante la que Maggie se había comportado antes con cierta timidez, pero ante la que ahora, de pronto, hablaba con sinceridad. Sin embargo, debemos añadir que más tarde, cuando Maggie hubo recorrido con rapidez el camino que tenía que recorrer, con paso agitado pero decidido, dejó de tener importancia el que aquella gente fuera la misma o no. Entre tanto, la concreta impresión que los invitados le produjeron aquella noche le había rendido el servicio, al parecer, de romper el hielo precisamente en el punto en que más grosor tenía. De una forma todavía más imprevista aquel servicio había beneficiado igualmente a su padre, puesto que tan pronto como se fueron todos hizo con exactitud lo que ella esperaba de él y ya había perdido las esperanzas de que lo hiciera; pero lo hizo como lo hacía todo, con una sencillez que daba el carácter de inútil a todo intento de sondearle más profundamente, de hacerle hablar más, de indagar, como él decía, lo que había «detrás» de sus palabras. Lo dijo sin ambages dando a sus palabras un tono bella y valerosamente irrelevante, atenuado solamente por la consideración de que más les valía no romper el momento de encanto:

—Creo que más vale que no vayamos, ¿no te parece, Maggie?, precisamente ahora que tan bien estamos aquí.

Esto fue todo, sin que las palabras entrañasen ulteriores consecuencias, pero para Maggie el asunto quedó concluido de una vez para siempre, y también quedó concluido para Americo y Charlotte, en quienes el efecto fue inmediato, prodigioso, como secretamente y casi con el aliento cortado percibió Maggie. Para ella, ahora todo encajaba tan bien con todo lo demás y podía darse cuenta de que el efecto había sido prodigioso, incluso observando la política de no mirar siquiera a los otros dos. Y así transcurrieron cinco maravillosos minutos durante los cuales Americo y Charlotte se agigantaron a uno y otro lado de Maggie, hasta adquirir un tamaño superior al de cualquier pensamiento, al de cualquier peligro, al de cualquier seguridad. Así discurrió un período que fue vertiginoso para ella, durante el cual no prestó atención a

ninguno de los dos, igual que si no estuvieran presentes en la estancia.

Nunca, nunca los había tratado Maggie de aquella manera, ni siquiera unos momentos antes, cuando aplicó su arte al grupo de Matcham, pues su actual comportamiento significaba una exclusión todavía más intensa; en el aire pesaba el silencio mientras Maggie hablaba con su padre, como si él fuera la única persona a quien tenía en consideración. El señor Verver había dado a Maggie la nota de una manera pasmosa al aludir a lo bien que estaba —refiriéndose al éxito de la cena—, que podía considerarse como un soborno que los inducía a renunciar, de manera que parecía que los dos hablaran al impulso del egoísmo, pensando en la ocasión de repetir la cena. Por esto, en un acto de energía sin precedentes, Maggie se arrojó en brazos de su padre y con absoluta firmeza sostuvo la mirada de los ojos del señor Verver mientras se decía a sí misma: «¿Qué quiere decir con estas palabras? Ésta es la cuestión: ¿qué pretende?», al tiempo que sonreía, hablaba e inauguraba su nuevo sistema, pero sin dejar de estudiar una vez más todos los síntomas que presentaba su padre, aquellos síntomas que la reciente ansiedad le había hecho familiares, y contando los pasmosos minutos, con referencia a los otros dos. Los otros dos, al parecer de Maggie, se agigantaban con su silencio. Luego, se dio cuenta de que no alcanzó a medir la duración de aquel silencio, pero duró y duró —tanto que hasta habría podido calificarse, en otras circunstancias, de silencio embarazoso— como si la propia Maggie estuviera tirando de él. Sin embargo, diez minutos más tarde, en el coche que los llevaría a casa, al que su marido se había dirigido sin entretenerse tan pronto les anunciaron que se hallaba en la puerta, Maggie aumentó aquella tensión hasta el punto de casi producir una ruptura. El Príncipe, dirigiéndose a la puerta, no permitió a Maggie que se quedara charlando el tiempo que solía al término de las veladas como aquélla. Ésta, atenta a todo, consideró que era un indicio de los impacientes deseos del Príncipe de modificar el extraño efecto de no haber aplaudido instantáneamente —y de no haberlo hecho tampoco Charlotte— la solución de la cuestión debatida ante ellos, o mejor dicho, resuelta ante ellos. El Príncipe había tenido tiempo de darse cuenta de la impresión que posiblemente produjo en Maggie que el hecho de que él la apremiara virtualmente a dirigirse al coche estaba relacionado con su impresión de que ahora tenía que actuar en un terreno diferente y nuevo. Si Maggie hubiera adoptado una actitud un poco ambigua ante el Príncipe, esto le habría atormentado, pero el Príncipe ya había hallado algo que suavizar y corregir, algo que Maggie astutamente intuía. En realidad, estaba preparada para ello, y cuando se sentó en el coche, quedó pasmada de lo muy preparada que estaba.

Dándose cuenta de la magnífica coherencia de su pensamiento, dijo:

—Tenía la seguridad de que mi padre haría esto en caso de que yo le dejara decidir por sí mismo. Le he dejado decidir, y mira el resultado. Le desagrada viajar, prefiere estar con nosotros. Ves los efectos, pero quizá no veas la causa. Aunque creo que la causa es maravillosa.

Su marido, después de sentarse junto a ella, nada dijo y nada hizo durante un tiempo, mientras Maggie se mantenía en guardia. A ella le causaba la impresión de que pensara, esperara, decidiera. Y como Maggie suponía, antes de hablar, el Príncipe actuó. Puso el brazo alrededor del cuerpo de Maggie y la atrajo hacia él.

El Príncipe se entregó a la prueba, se entregó al largo y firme abrazo con un solo brazo, a la infinita presión del cuerpo entero de Maggie contra el suyo, así lo aconsejaban y prescribían circunstancias como la presente. En consecuencia, sintiéndose exquisitamente solicitada y sintiéndolo, de manera profundamente íntima, como no podía por menos, Maggie dijo lo que deseaba y se proponía decir; teniendo la impresión, más fuerte que cualquier otra, de que debía comportarse con sentido de la responsabilidad, fuera lo que fuese lo que el Príncipe hiciera. Sí, Maggie se encontraba en poder del Príncipe, pero también se encontraba bajo su consciente responsabilidad, y lo extraordinario era que entre las dos fuerzas, la segunda se convertía ahora en la más potente. Entre tanto, él demoraba dar contestación a las palabras de su esposa, pero al fin lo hizo en cierta manera:

—¿La causa de que tu padre haya decidido no ir de viaje?

—Sí, y de que yo deseara que lo decidiera por sí mismo sin que yo insistiera en ningún sentido.

En su estado de tensión Maggie hizo otra pausa, lo que le produjo la impresión de que ejercía una resistencia inmensa. Fue muy rara y totalmente nueva esta sensación que Maggie tuvo de poseer de manera casi milagrosa una ventaja que, de forma absoluta, podía conservar o abandonar allí en aquel instante, en el coche, mientras avanzaban. Aquello era raro, indeciblemente raro, tal era la claridad con la que Maggie veía que si renunciaba a aquella ventaja, renunciaría asimismo a todo para siempre. Y lo que el poder de su marido significaba, como Maggie sentía en el tuétano de los huesos, era que ella debía renunciar. Precisamente a este fin el Príncipe había recurrido a su infalible remedio mágico. El Príncipe sabía cómo

recurrir a él. En ocasiones así, como Maggie había tenido ocasión de comprobar en los últimos tiempos, el Príncipe sabía ser un amante generoso en grado sumo; precisamente, era ésta una de las facetas de su carácter que Maggie jamás dejaba de estimar como una parte de su gracia generosa y noble, de su talento para ejercer el encanto, para la conversación, para la expresión, para la vida. A Maggie le habría bastado cierto movimiento para apoyar la cabeza en su hombro y darle a entender que abandonaba toda resistencia. Mientras avanzaban, todos los latidos de su conciencia le inducían a hacerlo, es decir, todos los latidos salvo uno: el de su más profunda necesidad de saber dónde se hallaba «en realidad». En consecuencia, cuando la Princesa expresó su pensamiento todavía conservaba la cabeza y tenía la intención de seguir conservándola, a pesar de que también miraba a través de la ventanilla del coche, con ojos a los que habían acudido las lágrimas de las penas sufridas, lágrimas quizá felizmente invisibles a la escasa luz de la noche. Maggie estaba haciendo un esfuerzo que le producía un dolor horrible, y como sea que no podía llorar claramente, sus ojos se ahogaban en el silencio. De todas maneras, consiguió con su mirada, a través de la plaza que se abría junto a ella, a través del grisáceo panorama de la noche londinense, la hazaña de no perder de vista aquello que quería conseguir y sus labios la ayudaron y protegieron, al ser capaces de hablar alegremente:

—Es para no alejarme de ti, querido. Por eso mi padre renunciaría a cualquier cosa.

Ella guardó silencio unos instantes y, con la vista fija en el exterior, añadió:

—De la misma forma que iría a cualquier sitio si tú fueras con él, quiero decir los dos solos.

Antes de dar respuesta a estas palabras, Americo dejó pasar unos instantes:

—¡Gran persona! ¿Quieres que le proponga una cosa?

—Si te sientes con ánimos para soportarlo…

El Príncipe preguntó:

—¿Y dejaros solas a Charlotte y a ti?

—¿Por qué no?

Después de decir estas palabras, Maggie tuvo que guardar unos momentos de silencio, pero cuando habló lo hizo con voz clara:

—¿Por qué no puede ser Charlotte uno de mis motivos? ¿Por qué el que no me guste apartarme de ella no puede ser una de mis razones? Siempre ha sido tan buena, tan perfecta para conmigo… Pero jamás lo ha sido de una forma tan maravillosa como ahora. Últimamente hemos estado más juntas pensando casi únicamente la una en la otra, igual que en los viejos tiempos.

Con acento de consumación, ya que Maggie consideraba que se trataba de un hecho consumado, prosiguió:

—Parecía que nos hubiéramos estado echando en falta la una a la otra, que nos hubiéramos distanciado un poco, a pesar de llevar vidas tan paralelas.

Después de una breve pausa, se apresuró a añadir:

—Pero los buenos momentos siempre llegan por sí mismos, lo único que hay que hacer es esperarlos. Bueno, esto has podido verlo por ti mismo gracias a la manera en que has tratado siempre a mi padre; has podido sentirlo por ti mismo, a tu manera bella, hermosa; has podido percibir todos los matices, toda la brisa cambiante, sin que haya sido necesario decirte nada, ni impelerte a nada; lo has percibido gracias a tu ternura, gracias a tus buenos sentimientos. Desde luego, en todo momento te has dado cuenta de que los dos, él y yo, valorábamos en todo lo que vale cuanto tú hacías, cuanto hacías para que no se sintiera demasiado solo, en tanto que yo, por mi parte, tampoco me he olvidado de él.

Después de unos instantes, Maggie prosiguió:

—Esto es algo que jamás podré agradecerte en la debida medida. De entre todo lo que has hecho en beneficio mío, esto es lo mejor.

Maggie prosiguió relatando como si lo hiciera por simple placer de relatar las formas que la liberalidad del Príncipe había adoptado, incluso a sabiendas de que el Príncipe lo sabía forzosamente, lo cual formaba parte también de su fácil percepción:

—Esos días en que llevabas al niño a casa de papá, y en que luego ibas siempre a buscarlo… No podías ingeniarte nada que pudiera gustar más a mi padre. Además, como sabes muy bien, siempre le has gustado a papá, y tú siempre, con gran elegancia, le has inducido a creer a él que te gusta a ti. Durante estas últimas semanas te has comportado como si desearas recordárselo de nuevo con el fin de complacerle.

Y Maggie concluyó:

—Y todo se debe a ti. Has producido tus efectos, entre ellos el de que mi padre no desee apartarse de ti, ni siquiera durante uno o dos meses. No quiere preocuparte, ni quiere aburrirte. Creo que esto, como muy

bien te consta, jamás lo ha hecho. Y si me das el tiempo preciso, ya me encargaré, como siempre me he encargado, de que jamás llegue a hacerlo.

Maggie había dicho lo que pensaba matizando las palabras, expresándose bien, y lo hizo sin dificultad, porque todas y cada una de sus palabras reflejaban una larga evolución de los sentimientos, por cuanto era lo que plenamente sentía. Maggie había pintado el cuadro y había obligado al Príncipe a comprenderlo, lo había colgado ante su vista, recordándole felizmente que el Príncipe había llegado cierto día con el apoyo del Principino al punto de proponer, en Eaton Square, ir al parque zoológico para llevar con él, impelido por tan placentera inspiración, tanto al mayor como al menor de sus compañeros, diciendo al segundo de ellos que iban a presentar al abuelito, un abuelito nervioso y un tanto propicio a estropear la diversión, a los leones y a los tigres que se hallaban allí más o menos en libertad. De esta manera, Maggie dejó caer gota a gota en el silencio de su marido la verdad acerca de su bondadoso carácter y sus buenos modales, y fue precisamente esta demostración de las virtudes del Príncipe lo que aumentó la extrañeza, incluso para la propia Maggie, de que no cediera ante el Príncipe. Era solamente la cuestión del acto más trivial de rendición, de la vibración de un nervio, del movimiento de un músculo, pero este acto adquirió importancia para los dos debido a que ella no hacía nada salvo hablar en aquel mismo tono que de una manera natural tendría que haberla arrastrado a la ternura. Maggie se percataba más y más, y cada minuto que pasaba se lo demostraba, de que el Príncipe con sólo un toque correcto podía hacer que ella dejara de estar en guardia, con sólo un toque correcto que se hallaba a millones de millas de distancia de la actual anomalía, tan insatisfactoria, y que consistiría en que el Príncipe con benévola clarividencia le dijera una definitiva y feliz informalidad. «Vente conmigo a cualquier sitio. Tú. Ven conmigo y no necesitaremos pensar en nada ni en nadie. Ni siquiera será preciso que hablemos.» Palabras tan breves como éstas habrían bastado para satisfacer a Maggie, para quebrantar totalmente su resistencia. Pero éstas eran las únicas palabras que podían servir a este fin. Maggie las esperaba, y hubo un instante supremo en que, por las pruebas del resto de la persona del Príncipe, tuvo la impresión de sentirlas en el corazón y en los labios de su marido, pero las palabras no sonaron, y como sea que esto le indujo a esperar más, también la indujo a estar más en guardia. A su vez, esto hizo ver a Maggie que también el Príncipe esperaba y estaba en guardia, así como lo mucho que él había esperado algo que ahora sabía que no iba a llegar. No, no llegaría si el Príncipe no correspondía a Maggie, si se limitaba a decir palabras erróneas, en vez de decir las palabras debidas. Si él pudiera decir lo que debía decir, todo llegaría; y ahora, el que todo cristalizara para la recuperación de su felicidad al impulso de un solo toque del Príncipe pendía de un delgado hilo. Sin embargo, esta posibilidad pareció brillar para Maggie durante cincuenta segundos y luego se enfrió; al hundirse, alejándose de ella, sintió el escalofrío de la realidad, y estando casi oprimida contra el corazón de su esposo y sintiendo su aliento en la mejilla, volvió a tener conciencia del sutil rigor de su actitud, un rigor muy superior al de su natural manera de ser. Por fin, los dos tuvieron silencios que casi fueron rudas expresiones de su recíproca resistencia, silencios que persistieron a través de los notables intentos del Príncipe de tratar aquella recordación, a la que Maggie se había entregado, del papel que el Príncipe había interpretado últimamente, de comprender toda la dulzura de las palabras que Maggie le había dirigido, como si fuera una manera de hacerle el amor. Para ella no era esto, ni mucho menos. ¡Si de hacer el amor al Príncipe se hubiese tratado, Maggie podría hacerlo mucho mejor! Ahora se le ocurrió decir, con referencia a aquello de que había estado hablando:

—Desde luego, si se trata de ir a algún sitio, mi padre iría con mucho gusto y con entusiasmo si tú le acompañaras. Estoy convencida de que le gustaría tenerte solo para él durante un tiempo.

Al cabo de un rato, el Príncipe preguntó, sondeando a Maggie:

—¿Crees que tiene la intención de proponerme algo?

—No, no… Como has tenido sobradas ocasiones de comprobar, nunca pide nada. Pero creo que si se lo propusieras tú, «raudo como el rayo», como tú dices, aceptaría.

A Maggie le constaba que sus palabras tenían un claro matiz de imposición de condiciones, e incluso mientras hablaba se preguntó si no sería causa de que el Príncipe apartara el brazo con que la tenía enlazada. El que no la soltara la indujo a suponer que le había obligado de repente a pensar todavía con más intensidad, a pensar con la atención tan concentrada que no podía hacer otra cosa. Y en el mismo instante, el Príncipe se comportó exactamente como si estuviera pensando muy concentrado. Adoptó una actitud incongruente que causó una impresión superficial; fue como un salto que le apartó del tono de gravedad con el que los dos habían hablado, y que le reveló a ella que su esposo tenía necesidad de ganar tiempo. Maggie advirtió que él se daba cuenta de que se hallaba en una posición débil, y que la advertencia

que le había dirigido había llegado al Príncipe y también a Charlotte de modo excesivamente brusco. Maggie volvió a comprender que, ante su advertencia, los dos se veían obligados a modificar su comportamiento, aun cuando, para efectuar esta modificación de la manera que deseaban, necesitaban un período más o menos largo de recobrada independencia. Por el momento Americo se veía obligado a actuar de una manera que no le gustaba, y parecía que Maggie observara sin disimulo los esfuerzos de su marido. El Príncipe dijo:

—¿Qué crees que hará este año tu padre? ¿Irá a Fawns por Pascua de Pentecostés para quedarse a pasar la temporada?

Maggie habló con acento meditativo:

—Imagino que hará lo que considere que es más agradable para ti. Desde luego, también debemos tener en cuenta a Charlotte. Aunque el hecho de que vayan temprano a Fawns no significa que tú y yo estemos obligados a ir también.

Como un eco, Americo repitió:

—¡No significa que tú y yo estemos obligados a ir también!

—Podemos hacer lo que queramos. En realidad, no nos necesitan, por fortuna son perfectamente felices los dos juntos.

El Príncipe repuso:

—La verdad es que tu padre nunca es tan feliz como cuando tú estás junto a él para gozarte con su dicha.

Maggie observó:

—Ciertamente, puedo gozar con la dicha de mi padre, pero la verdad es que yo no soy la causa de tal dicha.

Su marido declaró:

—Tú eres la causa de la mayor parte de las cosas que son buenas para nosotros.

Pero Maggie recibió en silencio este tributo y, al instante, el Príncipe prosiguió:

—Si la señora Verver tiene atrasos de tiempo contigo, como tú dices, difícilmente podrá pagártelos ni tú podrás cobrarlos, si nosotros, si tú y yo, nos alejamos de ella.

Maggie murmuró:

—Comprendo lo que quieres decir.

El Príncipe dejó que Maggie meditara sus palabras, después de lo cual preguntó:

—¿Crees que podemos, así, de repente, proponer un viaje a tu padre?

Maggie dudó, pero al fin expresó el fruto de sus reflexiones:

—Tendría la ventaja de que, por fin, Charlotte podría estar conmigo, quiero decir que podría estar más tiempo conmigo. Y también debemos tener en cuenta que no considero correcto elegir precisamente esta temporada para irme, ya que con ello causaría la impresión de carecer de conciencia, de carecer de gratitud, de no corresponder debidamente; en resumen, de querer desprenderme de Charlotte. Y creo que, al contrario, debo dar muy claras muestras de corresponder a Charlotte quedándome sola con ella durante un mes.

—¿Quieres quedarte sola con ella durante un mes? —Creo que sería maravilloso.

Alegremente, Maggie añadió:

—¡Incluso podríamos ir las dos solas a Fawns!

El Príncipe preguntó:

—¿Tan feliz serías sin mí?

—Sí, querido, siempre y cuando tú fueras feliz en compañía de papá. Esto me dejaría tranquila. Entretanto, yo iría a vivir a casa de Charlotte o Charlotte podría venir a vivir a Portland Place.

Con alegre vaguedad, el Príncipe exclamó:

—¡Ajá!

Maggie prosiguió:

—Tendría la impresión de que de esta manera pondríamos de relieve la misma clase de afecto.

Pensando en voz alta, el Príncipe preguntó:

—¿Quién? ¿Charlotte y yo?

Maggie volvió a dudar.

—Tú y yo, querido.

El Príncipe comprendió rápidamente a Maggie, ahora:

—Claro, claro… ¿Y qué razón crees que puedo dar, a tu padre, quiero decir?

—¿Para proponerle hacer un viaje? Pues la más sencilla, si es que en conciencia puedes. El deseo de serle agradable. Con ésta basta.

Algo hubo en esta contestación que indujo a su marido a reflexionar. Preguntó:

—¿«En conciencia»? ¿Ya santo de qué no he de hacerlo en conciencia?

A continuación el Príncipe arguyó:

—Según lo que tú has dicho, mi propuesta no será sorpresa alguna para él. Y creo que, en el peor de los casos, tu padre me tiene conceptuado como la última persona en el mundo con deseos de hacer algo que pueda causarle un gran perjuicio.

Una vez más Maggie percibió aquella observación, la de la consciente necesidad de no causar daño o perjuicio. De nuevo Maggie se preguntó por qué adoptaban aquel punto de vista de cautela, cuando su padre se había quejado tan poco como ella, o quizá menos. Hallándose los dos juntos gozando de tan perfecta tranquilidad, ¿qué podía ser lo que en ellos sugiriese la necesidad de no causar daño? En su fuero interno Maggie examinó esta actitud, en los otros dos, y la vio vívida y concreta, directamente propagada por su marido a Charlotte. Sin embargo, antes de que tuviera plena conciencia de lo anterior, repitió en la intensidad de su pensamiento las últimas palabras de Americo:

—Eres la última persona en el mundo con deseos de hacer algo que pueda causarle un perjuicio.

Maggie oyó sus propias palabras, oyó el tono de sus palabras después de haberlas pronunciado, y con tanta mayor claridad lo oyó, porque en seguida sintió la mirada de su marido en su cara, muy cerca, tan cerca que no podía verle. El Príncipe la miraba debido a que había quedado impresionado. La miraba fijamente, a pesar de que cuando por fin habló, sus palabras no fueron evasivas:

—Creo que en esta materia estamos de acuerdo; tú misma has dicho que estimas que me preocupo notablemente de que tu padre viva de la manera más cómoda y placentera posible. En este caso, tu padre podría demostrar que tiene conciencia de ello siendo él quien me proponga el viaje. Maggie preguntó inmediatamente:

—¿Y te irías con él?

El Príncipe guardó silencio, aunque sólo un instante:

—*Per Dio*!

También Maggie hizo una pausa, pero la rompió con una intensa sonrisa, ya que se palpaba la alegría en el aire:

—Has podido decir esto con toda tranquilidad porque sabes muy bien que la propuesta es de una naturaleza tal que impide que mi padre te la haga.

Más tarde, Maggie no hubiera sido capaz de decir, y en realidad ni siquiera a sí misma podía explicárselo, en virtud de qué transición, en virtud de qué cambio marcadamente brusco en su relación personal, su conversación terminó con una especie de tregua tácitamente establecida, aunque casi confesada, entre los dos. Lo advirtió por el tono en que Americo repitió:

—¿«Con tranquilidad»?

—Con tranquilidad respecto al riesgo de estar obligado a convivir con mi padre, si el caso se diera, durante un período excesivamente largo. Mi padre es una persona que se da perfecta cuenta de que esto puede constituir un riesgo para ti. En consecuencia, no te hará semejante propuesta. Su modestia se lo impide.

Ahora se miraban a los ojos cada uno en un rincón del coche. El Príncipe, sonriendo, exclamó:

—¡Oh, vuestra célebre modestia! ¿De modo que si no insisto…? —Seguiremos sencillamente tal como estamos.

El Príncipe observó:

—Bueno, a fin de cuentas, estamos muy bien.

Pero el Príncipe no dijo estas palabras con la expresión que hubieran tenido en el caso de que su mudo cambio, el del intento de captura y de la conseguida fuga, no hubiese tenido lugar. Sin embargo, como Maggie no dijo nada para contradecir la afirmación del Príncipe, éste tuvo la oportunidad de concebir otra idea:

—Realmente no sé si sería conveniente. Que me entrometiera, quiero decir.

—¿Que te entrometieras?

—Entre tu padre y su esposa. De todos modos, ha de haber una manera para conseguir que sea Charlotte quien se lo proponga.

Maggie quedó pensativa, por lo que el Príncipe aclaró:

—Podemos sugerirle a Charlotte que sugiera a tu padre que me permita llevarlo de viaje.

Maggie exclamó:

—¡Oh!

—En ese caso, si tu padre pregunta a Charlotte por qué tan de repente pretendo hacerle semejante propuesta, ésta podrá explicarle la razón.

El coche se había detenido; el lacayo, que se había apeado, llamó a la puerta de la casa. Maggie preguntó:

—¿Y tú crees que ésta sería una manera bonita de hacerlo?

—Efectivamente. El que nosotros convenciéramos a Charlotte sería en sí convincente.

Mientras el lacayo regresaba junto al coche para abrir la puerta, Maggie dijo:

—Comprendo.

A pesar de sentirse un poco desconcertada, repitió:

—Comprendo.

En realidad, lo que de repente había comprendido era que su madrastra posiblemente daría a entender que ella, Maggie, estaba ante todo preocupada por la propuesta, y esto le trajo a la memoria la necesidad de evitar que su padre creyera que estaba preocupada por algo, por poco que fuera. Al instante se apeaba del coche con una leve sensación de derrota. Su marido, con el fin de ayudarla a bajar, se había apeado antes, pero ahora, después de haberse adelantado un poco, la esperaba en el borde de la baja terraza, subido a un peldaño que se hallaba ante la puerta abierta; a uno y otro lado aguardaban sendos domésticos. Maggie tuvo la súbita sensación de llevar una vida tremendamente ordenada e invariable, y algo había en el rostro de Americo, mientras su mirada volvía a encontrarse con la de Maggie a la mortecina luz de la lámpara, que era como un consciente recordatorio de aquella clase de vida. Hacía pocos instantes que Americo había contestado claramente a Maggie y, al parecer, nada más podía decir. Era casi igual que si hubiera proyectado ser él quien dijera la última palabra y Maggie le contemplara gozando por haberla dicho. De la forma más extraña que quepa imaginar, era casi lo mismo que si su esposo le hubiera devuelto la pelota, por haber producido Maggie una nueva inquietud, un nuevo dolor, por la manera en que se había alejado de él durante el viaje en coche.

Capítulo XXVIII

La nueva inquietud de Maggie bien hubiera podido desvanecerse con el paso del tiempo, habida cuenta de que ella no tuvo conciencia en el transcurso de los días siguientes de nuevos síntomas que sustentaran esa inquietud. Sin embargo, quedó impresionada, desde otro punto de vista, por un incremento de las manifestaciones de la diferencia cuya explicación le obsesionaba. Al cabo de una semana se había dado cuenta de que si había quedado afectada en cierta manera, no menos lo había quedado su padre porque el marido de Maggie y su propia esposa se cernían alrededor de ellos, de modo que de repente el grupo formado por los cuatro había comenzado una vida en común como jamás habían llevado, debido a esa misma razón casi cómica y en tanto las alegres apariencias durasen. Bien podía deberse a causas accidentales y a meras coincidencias, y al menos eso fue lo que Maggie se dijo al principio. Pero a la superficie habían aflorado abundantes oportunidades que aumentaban las apariencias del común vivir, agradables pretextos, ciertamente agradables, tan agradables como Americo podía conseguir que fueran, para llevar a efecto conjuntos empeños, para emprender aventuras compartidas, para que siempre resultara, de forma harto divertida, que los cuatro deseaban hacer lo mismo, al mismo tiempo y de la misma manera. Hasta cierto punto, parecía un tanto raro lo anterior, habida cuenta de que tan pocos eran los deseos que durante largo tiempo padre e hija habían manifestado. Sin embargo, parecía aceptablemente natural que Americo y Charlotte buscaran alivio si al fin se sentían un poco fatigados de su recíproca compañía, no descendiendo al bajo nivel de sus respectivos cónyuges, sino arrastrando a éstos a la clase de vida que ellos dos llevaban constantemente. Después de la cena celebrada en Eaton Square en honor de lady Castledean, Maggie se había dicho a sí misma: «Estamos en el tren, de repente nos hemos despertado en el tren y avanzamos a toda velocidad, igual que si nos hubieran metido en el vagón mientras dormíamos; como dos cajas selladas y marcadas». Y bien hubiera podido añadir: «Quería ponerme en marcha, ciertamente estoy en marcha, avanzo sin problemas, sí, porque estos dos lo hacen todo en nuestro beneficio, es maravilloso comprobar su comprensión, y lo bien que consiguen lo que se proponen». Sí, esto era lo que ante todo y sobre todo Maggie tenía que reconocer. Parecía tan fácil para los cuatro formar ahora un cuarteto como fácil había parecido antes y durante tan largo tiempo formar dos parejas, siendo, lo primero, un descubrimiento absurdamente tardío. El único punto en que el éxito parecía quedar un tanto en entredicho día tras día estaba representado por el irresistible impulso que Maggie sentía a agarrarse a su padre, cuando el tren daba una sacudida de vez en cuando. Entonces, y ello no podía negarse, la mirada del señor Verver y la de Maggie se encontraban, de manera que efectuaban un acto de positiva violencia contra los otros, contra aquel espíritu de unión o, por lo menos, contra el logro del cambio que la propia Maggie se había propuesto conseguir.

El grado máximo en el cambio se alcanzó sin duda alguna el día en que el grupo de invitados de Matcham cenó en la casa de Portland Place. Éste fue el día en que quizá más de veras Maggie llegó a su máxima gloria social, en el sentido de que aquélla resultó ser su ocasión, una ocasión personalmente suya, en la que todos se unieron generosamente, en que todos se rindieron, conspirando para convertirla en la heroína de la velada. Incluso parecía que el padre de Maggie, hombre que siempre había tenido más iniciativas en calidad de invitado que de anfitrión, hubiera formado parte también de aquella conspiración. Esta impresión no quedaba atenuada por la presencia de los Assingham, quienes ahora también se hallaban

plenamente afectados, después de un breve período de calma chicha, por el viento que impulsaba a todos los demás, quienes daban a nuestra joven amiga, por lo menos en cuanto a Fanny hacía referencia, la sensación de estar animados por la intención de darle alientos y aplaudirla. Fanny, que no había asistido a la cena anterior debido a cierta preferencia observada y manifestada por Charlotte, hizo acto de presencia a ésta, ataviada con un nuevo vestido de terciopelo de color naranja adornado con gran profusión de turquesas, y además, dotada de una confianza en sí misma que era cuanto diferente podía ser de aquel excesivo apocamiento con que se comportó en Matcham, según dedujo la dueña de la casa. Maggie no era indiferente a la oportunidad que se le ofrecía de deshacer aquel entuerto y nivelar la balanza por lo que, en la presente ocasión, parecía tener unos deseos generales de rectificar. Maggie quería comprobar por sí misma que en la alta esfera de Portland Place, casa ajena desde todos los puntos de vista a celos de jurisdicciones, su amiga podía sentirse tan «buena» como la que más; podía incluso, en ciertos momentos, casi causar la impresión de erigirse en la dirigente, en lo tocante a reconocimiento y celebración, en la medida en que la velada podía conducir a intensificar el esplendor de la joven Princesa. La señora Assingham causó a Maggie la impresión de darle constantemente la oportunidad de conseguirlo, y en parte se debió a la inteligente ayuda de Fanny el que saliera a relucir y quedara resaltada la pequeña Princesa que en Maggie había. Ella no hubiera podido decir concretamente cómo ocurrió, pero lo cierto fue que se sintió, por vez primera en su carrera social, dando la justa medida de la noción pública y popular que de persona de tal calidad se tiene, tal como esta noción se le imputaba por los cuatro costados; y en tanto se comportaba como tal Princesa, se preguntaba por qué extraña mezcla de elementos aquella noción popular podía expresarse en el comportamiento de personajes de tan supuesta grandeza como los Castledean y otros de semejante rango. Fanny Assingham causaba, en realidad, la impresión de actuar allí como uno de esos ayudantes apostados junto a la pista del circo, que cumplen la función de estimular, para que mantenga la misma velocidad en su paso, al reluciente animal que da vueltas y vueltas y sobre cuya grupa la señora de corta y estrellada falda brillantemente piruetea y adopta posturas. Todo esto era indudable. Maggie había olvidado, había declinado, ser la Princesita en cualquiera de los ambientes a ella abiertos, pero ahora que la mano colectiva se le ofrecía con tanto entusiasmo a fin de salir a la luz, como a la modesta mente de Maggie parecía, a pesar incluso de aquella exhibición de medias de color rosa y de aquella abreviación de enaguas, se sorprendía, alzadas las cejas, al darse cuenta de cuál era el aspecto en que se había equivocado. Maggie había invitado, para que acudieran a horas posteriores, después de la cena, a un segundo contingente que formaba la lista entera de sus amistades londinenses, lo cual era propio de una princesa para quien el arte principesco no tiene secretos. Esto era lo que estaba aprendiendo: a comportarse de manera sencilla y natural de acuerdo con la personalidad que se le atribuía, que se le presuponía, que se le imponía; y aun cuando se daban latentes consideraciones que en cierta manera obstaculizaban el desarrollo de la lección, aquella noche Maggie ensayó a más no poder la interpretación de su papel, y en ningún momento lo hizo con más éxito como en aquel en que, con gran agudeza, lo interpretó de manera especial para lady Castledean, quien quedó reducida, por fin, a un estado de pasividad sin precedentes. El ser testigo de tan alto resultado sonrojó de responsable gozo a la señora Assingham, quien contemplaba a su joven amiga con ojos esplendentes, realmente febriles, como si Maggie, de una manera maravillosa, súbita y extremadamente sutil, se hubiera convertido en fuente de socorro de la propia Fanny, se hubiera transformado en noble y divina fuente de recompensa. La intensidad del sabor de este manifiesto fenómeno era tal que, por medio de cierto proceso, y a través de unas conexiones que tampoco cabe determinar concretamente, Maggie también producía sus efectos en Americo y en Charlotte, ofreciendo el único inconveniente, del que ella se percataba gracias a su constante observación y reflexión, de afectar quizá todavía mayormente a su padre.

Esto constituía en verdad un peligro que durante largo tiempo tuvo momentos de extraño encanto, momentos que fueron precisamente aquellos en que el sentido de la cautela quedó tan abandonado en Maggie que sintió que la comunicación con su padre era más íntima que cualquier otra. De manera que resultaba imposible que no se transmitiera, entre Maggie y su padre, el mensaje de que algo singular ocurría. Esto era lo que ésta se decía una y otra vez, por lo que en aquella situación concurría de manera perceptible un elemento de consuelo, juntamente al de posible peligro, y Maggie imaginaba que aquella pareja que formaba con su padre avanzaba a tientas, con los labios cerrados, aun cuando dirigiéndose recíprocas miradas que jamás habían sido tan tiernas, en busca de cierta libertad, de cierta ficción, de cierta imaginaria valentía, que les permitiera hablar sin riesgos nacidos de la situación en sí misma. Y llegaría el momento, momento que al fin llegó, con un efecto tan penetrante como el del sonido que resultaba de

oprimir un botón eléctrico, en que Maggie colegiría el menos halagüeño de los significados en la agitación que había provocado. La interpretación meramente superficial de su caso y del de su padre hubiera consistido en afirmar que, después de haber sido, en cuanto a familia, durante largo tiempo y sin interrupciones deliciosamente felices, todavía les faltaba descubrir una nueva felicidad, una felicidad para la cual, afortunadamente, el apetito de su padre y el de la propia Maggie seguía siendo agudo y con capacidad de agradecimiento. Este vivo desarrollo de las relaciones entre los dos era lo que de vez en cuando provocaba en el señor Verver la aparición de aquel instinto que le inducía a aferrarse a algo, que ya hemos tenido ocasión de advertir, que bien hubiera podido quedar expresado en estas posibles palabras del señor Verver a su hija, en el caso de que no fuera ésta quien rompiera el silencio: «Todo es muy agradable, ¿verdad? Pero, a fin de cuentas, ¿dónde estamos? ¿Viajando en globo por los aires? ¿0 en las profundidades de la tierra, en los relumbrantes túneles de una mina de oro?». El equilibrio, esa preciosa condición, se mantenía a pesar de la reorganización, se había procedido a una nueva distribución de los diferentes pesos, pero el equilibrio se mantenía y triunfaba, lo cual constituía la razón por la que Maggie no podía, ante su compañero en aquella aventura, poner a prueba su experimento. Había equilibrio, y esto era lo que Maggie tenía que aceptar, sin intentar averiguar, so pretexto alguno, por encubierto que fuera el método, lo que su padre pensaba.

Y así vemos que Maggie tenía momentos en que se sentía supremamente unida a su padre por el rigor de su ley común, y cuando pensaba que el deseo de su padre, por evitarle todo género de padecimientos, era lo que mayor importancia tenía para él, así como el hecho de que los dos parecían no tener nada que hablar en lo referente a «interioridades», tenía la impresión de que su padre estuviera envuelto en una clase de dulzura que, a modo de consagración, no se daba ni siquiera en la atracción que su marido ejercía en ella. Sin embargo, quedó impotente, quedó todavía más incapaz de hablar cuando se produjo la interrupción, en el momento en que estaba plenamente preparada para decir a su padre: «Sí, a juzgar por todas las apariencias, éste es el mejor momento de que hasta el presente hemos gozado, pero ¿no ves, de todas maneras, lo mucho que estos dos deben trabajar conjuntamente para que este momento sea como es?, ¿no ves que mi éxito, mi éxito en la modificación de nuestra bella armonía, a fin de darle una nueva base, es un éxito de ellos, un éxito de su inteligencia, de su amabilidad, de su capacidad de mantenerse serenos, en resumen, de su total dominio sobre nuestras vidas?». Pero ¿cómo podía Maggie decir lo anterior sin decir al mismo tiempo mucho más? ¿Cómo podía decirlo sin decir también: «Harás todo lo que queramos salvo una cosa, salvo prescribirnos un comportamiento que produzca el efecto de separarlos a ellos dos?». ¿Cómo podía siquiera imaginar que era capaz de murmurar estas palabras, sin poner en labios de su padre unas palabras que la hubieran estremecido y acobardado? «¿Que se separen, querida? ¿Quieres que se separen? En ese caso, ¿quieres también que tú y yo nos separemos? Sí, porque ¿cómo puede tener lugar la primera separación sin la segunda?» Ésta era la pregunta que Maggie había oído formular a su padre en la esfera del espíritu, pregunta que llevaba una temible secuela de preguntas conexas y derivadas sin responder. La separación de Maggie y su padre era perfectamente lógica, aunque sólo fuera por la más poderosa entre todas las razones. Y la razón más poderosa, realmente la más poderosa, era que ninguno de los dos podía seguir permitiendo que la esposa del padre y el marido de la hija continuaran imponiéndoles una tan compacta formación. ¿Yen caso de que aceptaran esta situación con carácter prácticamente definitivo y actuaran basándose en ella como si estuviesen divididos, acaso sombríos fantasmas del pasado ahogado, fantasmas de uno y de otro, no mostrarían en el vacío del abismo sus pálidos e inquietantes rostros o alzarían en toda ocasión sus manos en ademán de exculpación y denuncia?

Entretanto, y meditando cuanto procede, Maggie se dijo a sí misma que en la reparación y en la calma podía haber una traición más profunda todavía. Ella volvería a sentirse sola, como sola se había sentido en los momentos de alta tensión ante su marido al regresar de la velada con los Castledean en la casa de Eaton Square. Aquella velada la había dejado muy alarmada, pero luego vino un momento de calma porque la alarma no había sido aún confirmada. Inevitablemente llegó el momento en que Maggie supo con estremecimiento qué era lo que había temido y por qué. Este momento tardó un mes en llegar, pero cuando llegó supo plenamente lo que representaba, por cuanto le reveló con claridad lo que Americo había querido decir al aludir al uso concreto que podía hacer de Charlotte en vista a su ratificada armonía y bienestar. Ahora Maggie, cuanto más pensaba en el tono que su esposo había empleado para expresar el disfrute de aquel recurso por parte de los dos, más claramente comprendía que era fruto de un arte conscientemente elaborado de tratarla a ella. En aquellos momentos, Americo había pensado muchas cosas, incluso había tenido conciencia, y no poca, de desear y, en consecuencia, de necesitar saber qué haría Maggie en un caso

determinado. El caso determinado consistía en que ella se sintiera amenazada hasta cierto punto, y en la suficiente medida para que fuera consciente de ello y, por muy horrible que fuera, imputarle a Americo una intención que hubiera quedado expresada mediante semejante palabra. Hablar de la posibilidad de hacer intervenir a Charlotte en un asunto que en aquel momento parecía ser exclusivamente privativo de Americo y Maggie, el que algo tan familiar y tan sencillo le causara la impresión de llevar en sí el germen de una amenaza, constituía para Maggie una cosa rara que con carácter temporal carecía de base, constituía la aventura de que su viva imaginación posiblemente se hubiera extraviado. Sin duda, ésta era precisamente la razón por la que había aprendido a esperar mientras pasaban las semanas con un notable o, mejor dicho, realmente excesivo disimulo de serenidad recuperada. A la equívoca relación del Príncipe no le siguió ninguna más, y esto exigía el ejercicio de la paciencia. De todas maneras, Maggie forzosamente tuvo que reconocer, con el paso del tiempo, que la indirecta del Príncipe había quedado clara en grado más que suficiente para que la aprensión experimentada por ella en el primer momento quedara justificada. La consecuencia de esto, a su vez, fue un renovado dolor al recordar la maña de que Americo había hecho gala. ¿Qué gravedad no podía llegar a tener el que Americo hubiera sido hábil en su trato con ella considerando que jamás ni en ningún momento le había impuesto siquiera la más leve carga en lo tocante a tolerarla, de hacerle dudar de ella, de temerla; en resumen, de tener que hacer cálculos sobre su comportamiento? La habilidad de su esposo había consistido sencillamente en hablar de utilizar a Charlotte, como si ésta perteneciera a los dos por igual; el triunfo de Americo, en esta ocasión, radicó precisamente en la sencillez. Maggie no podía decir la verdad —y esto lo sabía muy bien Americo—: «Tú utilizas a Charlotte y yo también la utilizo, pero la utilizamos de manera diferente y por separado. A nadie utilizamos conjuntamente sino a nosotros mismos, ¿o es que no lo ves? Con esto quiero decir que en los casos en que tenemos los mismos intereses, yo puedo servirte noble y exquisitamente en todo, y tú puedes por igual servirme noble y exquisitamente a mí. La única persona que cualquiera de nosotros dos necesita es el otro, por lo tanto ¿a santo de qué has de meter en un caso como éste, como si fuera cosa normal y corriente, a Charlotte?».

Maggie no podía discutir con Americo debido a que ello hubiera representado —y al pensarlo quedó paralizada— dar la nota. Sus palabras hubieran significado al instante una manifestación de celos, y los ecos y repercusiones hubieran llegado a su padre como si fueran el grito que taladra el silencio de un pacífico sueño. Durante muchos días fue para Maggie tan difícil gozar de veinte minutos de paz y tranquilidad en compañía de su padre como fácil había sido antes. En los viejos tiempos —tan largo parecía el tiempo transcurrido— se había dado en los largos diálogos con su padre cierto carácter inevitable, una especie de domesticada belleza en la previsión de cuanto les rodeaba. Pero en la actualidad Charlotte se encontraba siempre en Eaton Square cuando Americo la llevaba allí, y la llevaba constantemente. Y el Príncipe estaba presente siempre que Charlotte traía a su marido a Portland Place, adonde lo llevaba con mucha frecuencia. Las contadas ocasiones, los minutos en que por casualidad quedaban los dos mano a mano, poca importancia tenían para ellos, por cuanto el ritmo de aquel conversar mantenido a lo largo de toda la vida excluía todo género de tratamiento a la ligera como oportunidad para hablar de asuntos profundos. Jamás habían aprovechado un ocasional cuarto de hora para charlar acerca de cosas fundamentales, sino que, al contrario, se movían despacio en amplias y tranquilas estancias y eran capaces de guardar silencio en cualquier instante, lo que les producía un placer superior al de la expresión apresurada. Ciertamente, habían llegado al punto en que la recíproca atracción que sentían se medía, en cuanto a viveza, precisamente mediante esta economía de los sonidos. Desde luego, cabía la posibilidad de que se hablaran el uno al otro, mientras hablaban con sus cónyuges, pero éstos tenían medio más directo de saber cómo iban las relaciones entre ellos dos, en lo tocante a la presente fase. Éstas eran algunas de las razones por las que Maggie sospechaba que cuestiones fundamentales, como las he llamado, estaban emergiendo a la superficie gracias a un nuevo movimiento, y así lo sospechó una mañana de finales de mayo en que su padre se presentó solo en la casa de Portland Place. El señor Verver tenía su pretexto, y Maggie así lo comprendió. Dos días antes, el Principino había mostrado síntomas, afortunadamente no fueron persistentes, de un resfriado con fiebre, por lo que evidentemente quedó confinado en su hogar. Esto era motivo, y muy fundado, para pedir puntual información, pero no lo era, como rápidamente Maggie concluyó, para que su padre se las hubiera arreglado para prescindir de manera tan notoria —habida cuenta de la forma en que su vivir había quedado últimamente organizado— de la compañía de su esposa. Y ocurrió que a Maggie le faltaba, en aquellos momentos, su marido, y pronto veremos que dichos momentos tuvieron un especial significado, cuando haga constar que recordando que el Príncipe se había asomado a la

estancia para anunciar que salía de casa, la Princesa se preguntó con vaga ilusión si acaso sus respectivos *sposi* no iban a reunirse franca y abiertamente; incluso tuvo esperanzas de que, por el momento, ambos se sintieran dispuestos a tal reunión. Era extraña aquella necesidad que a veces sentía de pensar que sus respectivos cónyuges no daban excesiva importancia al repudio de la costumbre general que, hasta hacía pocas semanas, había tenido su apoyo y sustento, por una tan consignada corrección. Sin embargo, no se trataba de repudios, ninguno de ellos había llegado a estos extremos, ¿acaso en esos precisos instantes no daba Maggie directo testimonio en contra de los repudios con su propio comportamiento? De manera que cuando ella estuviera dispuesta a confesar que temía quedarse a solas con su padre, que temía lo que su padre pudiera decirle en semejante ocasión —en un lento y doloroso proceder que la aterraba—, llegaría el momento en que Americo y Charlotte manifestaran su desagrado al dar a entender que comprendían la situación.

Aquella mañana Maggie tenía la maravillosa impresión tanto de temer determinadas preguntas formuladas por su padre, como de ser capaz de poner freno, e incluso de eliminar gracias a su clara manera de recibirla, toda inquieta consideración imaginaria que su padre tuviera en lo tocante a la importancia de aquel temor. El día, soleado y tibio, llevaba ya el aliento de verano, por lo que, para empezar, les indujo a hablar de Fawns, de la manera en que Fawns les invitaba a ir allá. Pero Maggie se daba cuenta al considerarlo junto con su padre, que la amable invitación tanto afectaba a una pareja como a la otra, y su engañosa sonrisa casi llegó a ser convulsa. Así era, realmente constituía cierta especie de alivio el darse cuenta de ello: Maggie ya engañaba a su padre, llevada por una absoluta necesidad, como nunca, nunca, lo había hecho en su vida; le engañaba íntegramente en la medida que había decidido hacerlo. En la gran estancia de suave esplendor, en la que el señor Verver, renunciando a sentarse por razones de su incumbencia, paseaba del mismo modo que Americo solía; la necesidad oprimía a Maggie con la misma fuerza que lo hacía el encanto del antiguo goce del trato mutuo, tan sinceramente ejercido de nuevo, de la clara llaneza de su recíproca ternura, íntegramente destinada a la familia, como si fuera el resultado de una larga sucesión de sofás forrados de ricas tapicerías suavemente gastadas, en los que la teoría del contento del señor Verver se había aposentado gracias a los muchos ratos al lado de Maggie. En aquel preciso instante, Maggie supo, lo supo por adelantado y con más claridad de lo que jamás hubiera podido llegar a saberlo, que ni siquiera por un solo segundo debía cejar en su noble empeño de demostrar que carecía de problemas. De repente, Maggie lo vio todo bajo este prisma, advirtiendo las relaciones del mismo con buen número de remotas realidades; por ejemplo, se dio cuenta de que se comportaba de modo que redundaba en su propio beneficio cuando propuso salir de casa, en el ejercicio de su libertad y en homenaje a la estación del año, para dar un paseo por Regent's Park. Este lugar se hallaba cerca, un poco más arriba de Portland Place, y el Principino, muy mejorado por fortuna, ya se había dirigido allá, en digna y competente compañía, consideraciones que para Maggie tuvieron carácter defensivo, y todas ellas llegaron a ser en su mente parte de la tarea de cultivar la continuidad.

Después de haber dejado a su padre con el fin de ponerse algo para salir de casa, Maggie recordó desde el piso superior a su padre esperándola abajo, solo en la casa desierta, y este recuerdo trajo consigo, breve pero penetrantemente, una de aquellas bruscas interrupciones de coherencia en ella: el roce de una huera meditación ante el espejo, que casi la dejó paralizada, como le ocurría a menudo. Dicho en otras palabras, le trajo la vívida imagen del cambio que el matrimonio de su padre había producido. En aquellos instantes, el cambio concreto parecía consistir, ante todo y sobre todo, en la pérdida de la antigua libertad de su padre y de ella, el no haber tenido jamás que pensar, más que en todo lo que afectaba a los dos conjuntamente, en ninguna otra persona, ni en otras cosas, pudiendo preocuparse solamente de ellos dos. Este cambio no había resultado del matrimonio de Maggie, ya que su matrimonio jamás los había inducido a ninguno de los dos a pensar que debían comportarse con diplomacia, que debían tener en consideración otra presencia, ni siquiera la del marido de Maggie. Mientras la vana meditación proseguía, Maggie se preguntó: «¿Por qué se casó? ¿Por qué?». Luego pensó una vez más que difícilmente pudo haber algo más hermoso que la manera en que hasta el momento en que Charlotte quedó tan íntimamente incorporada a su vivir Americo había sabido mantenerse al margen. Lo que Maggie seguía debiendo a Americo por semejante actitud volvió a presentarse ante su vista como una larga columna de cifras o quizá, incluso, si así cabe decirlo, como un castillo de naipes. El maravilloso acto de su padre fue lo que derribó el castillo de naipes, lo que hizo que la suma de estas cifras diera un resultado erróneo. Inevitablemente acudió veloz a su mente la confusa y avasalladora oleada de sus razonamientos: «¿Por qué lo hizo, por qué?». Gimiente, se dijo: «Lo hizo por mí, por mí; lo hizo precisamente para que nuestra libertad —lo que para el pobrecillo solamente significaba mi

libertad— se ampliara en vez de menguar; lo hizo, como inspirado, para liberarme en la medida de lo posible de las preocupaciones que él pudiera ocasionarme». Y allí, en el piso superior, Maggie todavía tuvo tiempo, a pesar de la prisa, como reiteradas veces también lo había tenido con anterioridad, para permitir que los interrogantes anejos a estos pensamientos desfilaran ante ella por el solo hecho de hacerla parpadear, sobre todo el interrogante de saber si acaso podría hallar la solución a su comportamiento, de acuerdo con las intenciones que animaron a su padre, para así obligarse a que su «preocupación» por él no fuera en aumento, como éste se había propuesto. De esta manera Maggie tuvo de nuevo la impresión de que todo el peso de la responsabilidad de aquel caso recaía otra vez sobre sus hombros, con lo que quedó enfrentada, sin lugar a dudas, con la principal causa de su atormentado ánimo. Todo tenía su origen en su incapacidad para no preocuparse de lo que le ocurriera a su padre, de haber sido incapaz de dejar, sin sentir angustia, que su padre siguiera su camino, corriera sus propios riesgos, llevara su propia vida. Maggie había convertido la angustia en su pequeño y estúpido ídolo, y ahora, de una forma absoluta, mientras se atravesaba el sombrero con una larga aguja, no sin cierta perversidad, dijo en tono rayano en la irritación a su doncella, que era nueva y a quien en los últimos días había llegado a considerar abismal, que no la necesitaba e intentó centrar su atención en la posibilidad de llegar a un entendimiento con su padre.

¡Sí, sí…! Parecía próxima semejante posibilidad. También esta impresión dominó a Maggie en el momento en que ya estaba dispuesta para salir. Toda la vibración, toda la emoción del momento nacía precisamente por haber regresado su padre y ella dulcemente a las circunstancias de los tiempos de más sencillo vivir, al extraño parecido que se daba entre los sentimientos de ahora y los de los innumerables momentos anteriores ya tan lejanos. Maggie se había arreglado deprisa, a pesar de los avances de aquella marea que a veces la dejaba con el aliento cortado; pero una vez más tuvo que hacer una pausa en lo alto de la escalinata antes de iniciar el descenso para ir al encuentro de su padre; durante esta pausa se preguntó si era imaginable que, desde un punto de vista absolutamente práctico, sacrificara pura y simplemente a su padre. Maggie no entró en los detalles de lo que representaba sacrificar a su padre, no tenía necesidad alguna de ello debido a la claridad con que sabía que su padre la esperaba, que le encontraría paseando en la sala de estar, en el cálido y fragante ambiente a cuya calidad contribuían las ventanas abiertas y la abundancia de flores; le encontraría paseando lentamente, con vaga expresión, muy frágil y juvenil el aspecto y, superficialmente manejable, casi tanto como si fuera su hijo, dicho sea permitiéndonos una leve libertad, y al mismo tiempo su padre; y, sobre todo, revistiendo las apariencias propias de haber llegado quizá a la casa con el propósito de ser él quien le dijera a Maggie, quien le dijera: «Sacrifícame, querida hija; sacrifícame, sacrifícame». Si Maggie realmente lo quisiera, si insistiera en ello, podría oír a su padre diciéndolo, con palabras que parecían como un balido con plena conciencia y con deseos de complacerla, como un precioso, inmaculado y excepcional e inteligente cordero. Sin embargo, el efecto positivo que esta imagen tuvo en ella fue el de sacudírsela de encima en el mismo instante en que comenzó el descenso de la escalinata; después de haberse reunido con él, después de haber renovado el vínculo del trato, Maggie conocería plenamente el dolor de pensar que la imposibilidad en que se hallaba estaba constituida por la clara conciencia y la lúcida intención de su padre. Esto fue lo que sintió mientras le sonreía una vez más de manera hipócrita, mientras se calzaba los claros y frescos guantes e interrumpía este proceso para dar a la corbata de su padre un toque de presión que la dejaba en postura levemente más elegante, y para resarcirle de la oculta locura en que había incurrido, frotaba la nariz contra su mejilla, siguiendo sus tradiciones del más franco abandono. Desde el instante en que Maggie pudiera declarar a su padre culpable de tener aquellas intenciones, todos los problemas quedarían cerrados, inabordables, y ella tendría que redoblar su hipocresía. Maggie le besó, le arregló el nudo de la corbata y le dijo frases casuales, le guió en el camino de salida de la casa, cogiéndole del brazo, no para que su padre la llevara, sino para llevarle ella a él, haciéndolo con la misma íntima presión que siempre había ejercido siendo niña para indicar lo inseparable que de ella era una muñeca. Y lo hizo para tener la seguridad de que su padre no pudiera siquiera soñar la existencia de los problemas que ante sí tenían.

Capítulo XXIX

Nada hubo que indicara que los esfuerzos de Maggie fueran insuficientes hasta el momento en que se adentraron en el parque, y el señor Verver sorprendió a su hija, contra toda previsión, renunciando a poner en práctica una búsqueda seria del Principino. Se manifestó en el modo en que al poco se sentaron los dos al sol; en la manera en que el señor Verver se dejó caer con Maggie en las sillas que encontraron; en que su padre esperó un poco, luego de estar los dos aposentados, como si por fin Maggie pudiera hablar más concretamente como solían hacer los dos. Esto sólo sirvió para que Maggie percibiera con mayor agudeza todavía que las concreciones, cualquiera que fuera la dirección que tomaran, le estaban absolutamente prohibidas, que servirse de ellas sería para todos lo mismo que liberar de la correa a un perro ansioso de seguir un rastro. Las concreciones llegarían a donde el perro llegara, y revelarían la verdad sin que Maggie supiera exactamente cómo —¡Maggie estaba convencida de enfrentarse con la verdad!—, una verdad a la que ni siquiera indirectamente podía apuntar. De todas maneras, éste era el modo en que su apasionada prudencia se enfrentaba con el peligro, es decir, viendo síntomas y revelaciones en todo aquello en que fijaba la atención; sin embargo, estaba obligada, mientras veía el peligro, a dar evidentes muestras de que seguía impertérrita. Mientras estaban sentados, momentos hubo en que el señor Verver causaba la impresión de observar a Maggie como manteniéndose a la defensiva, entregado como estaba a pensar en algo nuevo que hiciera vacilar a su hija. Hubo pausas durante las cuales, Maggie, con su afecto tan dulce y sereno como la luz del sol, parecía empeñada en un juego absorbente, sobre una mesa, para ganar dinero, exigiendo a su padre que la distrajera lo menos posible. Luego, se sintió realmente orgullosa del gran estilo con que había sabido comportarse, en el aspecto que acabamos de decir. Más tarde, finalizada aquella salida, cuando ya habían vuelto sobre sus pasos para encontrarse con Charlotte y Americo que les esperaban en casa, Maggie pudo decirse a sí misma que de veras había sabido poner sus planes en práctica, aunque al mismo tiempo se imponía la difícil tarea de conseguir que la relación con su padre en todo momento no fuera de altura inferior a la de aquella otra ocasión, que pendía allá, en el pasado, como un cuadro enmarcado en un museo, y que era un hito en la historia de su antigua fortuna. Era aquella en que una tarde de verano, sentados el uno al lado del otro bajo las copas de los árboles en el parque de Fawns igual que ahora, habían permitido que su feliz confianza los arrullara con su más áureo susurro. En la actualidad, cabía la posibilidad de que se abriese a los pies de Maggie una trampa por el solo hecho de hacer referencia a pasar de nuevo una temporada en Fawns, por lo que no fue ella la primera en abordar el tema, a pesar de que su padre le causaba la impresión de guardar silencio al respecto para ver cuáles era las intenciones de su hija. En secreto, se decía: «¿Tal como ahora estamos, realmente podemos volver allá? ¿Realmente podré yo sola afrontar esa clase de vida, enfrentarme con ese intenso esfuerzo de mantener las apariencias indefinidamente de manera casi imposible, como nuestras circunstancias en el campo, tal como las hemos conformado y aceptado, comportan?». Maggie había quedado totalmente desorientada con esas dudas interiores, como después recordaría tan a menudo, pero también recordaría que su padre fue quien rompió el hielo, quizá sin causar la impresión de estar muy convencido, de manera muy parecida a aquella otra en que lo había hecho en la casa de Eaton Square, después de la cena ofrecida en honor de los Castledean.

La mente de Maggie había efectuado un largo viaje, se había adentrado profundamente en la visión de lo que podría significar un verano en Fawns, con Americo y Charlotte todavía más destacadamente presentes

bajo los más altos cielos de aquel lugar. ¿No sería que su padre, en realidad, no hablaba seriamente cuando decía de pasar el verano en Fawns, de la misma manera que tampoco le escuchaba seriamente? De todas maneras, el señor Verver salió del atolladero gracias a una transición que difícilmente hubiera podido evitar, lo cual significó que Maggie abandonara aquel viaje imaginario a que estaba entregada, abandono que se debió a que su padre comenzara a imitar —como jamás lo había hecho— el antiguo tono áureo. Por fin, fue el señor Verver quien le planteó la cuestión de si era realmente una gran idea —grande de verdad— salir de Inglaterra con cualquier pretexto, y pasar varias semanas en el extranjero en compañía del Príncipe. Entonces fue cuando Maggie se dio cuenta de que la «amenaza» formulada por su marido seguía todavía vigente, porque ella se encontraba ahora cara a cara con sus efectos. Sí, esta amenaza ocupó el resto del paseo de Maggie y su padre, los acompañó en el trayecto, y entró con ellos en la casa, además de hacer imposible ahora fingir, no recordar que la finalidad de la salida había sido reunirse con el Principino. La impresión inequívoca de Maggie fue que las palabras de su padre, pasados cinco minutos, indujeron a los dos a renovar el propósito inicial, a modo de refugio, y fueron la causa después de que se alegraran de que la compañía del muchacho, que consiguieron a su debido tiempo y de la que gozaron con el matiz impuesto a su alboroto por la institutriz, persona que esperaba que se le diera un trato considerado y que constituyera una capa que cubriese toda posible tensión. Sí, todo había quedado reducido a que el buen señor Verver había hablado con el fin de sondear a Maggie, de la misma manera que Charlotte ya había hablado con él animada por este igualmente bello propósito. La Princesa lo comprendió al instante en todos sus detalles. Y oyó a su padre y a su esposa tratar del singular caso. «El Príncipe me dice que Maggie proyecta que hagas un viaje al extranjero con él, y como él siempre está dispuesto a cumplir sus deseos me ha indicado que hable contigo por estimar que ésta es la manera más fácil para conseguir tu consentimiento. Como puedes ver, esto lo hago porque como sabes también yo estoy siempre dispuesta a que dichos deseos se hagan realidad. Te hablo de este asunto, sí, pero en esta ocasión reconozco que no comprendo del todo qué es lo que Maggie pretende. ¿Por qué precisamente ahora, de repente, quiere que los dos os vayáis juntos, y quedarse a solas conmigo? Reconozco que es halagador para mí, pero tú eres quien debe decidir de acuerdo con tus deseos. Evidentemente, el Príncipe está dispuesto a acceder a los deseos de Maggie, pero tú eres quien debe hablar con él y decidir. En realidad tendrías que hablar con ella.» Palabras más o menos parecidas a éstas fueron las que Maggie oyó en su imaginación, y su padre, después de haber esperado a que le hablara directamente, la había invitado a hacerlo.

Tal como Maggie se repitió *in mente* durante el resto del día, esto era precisamente lo que habían intentado mientras estaban sentados en las sillas del parque, y esto era lo que habían hecho, en la medida en que podían conversar francamente. Por lo menos, esta medida había quedado determinada, en el sentido de que cada uno de ellos estaba dispuesto a luchar hasta el último instante contra todo género de auténticas ansiedades para protegerse, para desvanecerlas. Al instante había confesado con su engañosa sonrisa, sin un solo pestañeo, mientras miraba a su padre a los ojos con igual dulzura que éste la miraba a los suyos, que se le había ocurrido que quizá los dos, el padre y su yerno, gustaran de hacer este viaje juntos, porque los dos llevaban largo tiempo viviendo de manera excesivamente casera. Maggie se expresó casi en términos picarescos, llevada por la inspiración de esta oportunidad, insinuando que un par de hombres jóvenes y con buen ánimo, al abandonar su confinamiento y emprender un camino cogidos del brazo, podían muy bien percibir agradables sensaciones en unas formas que, de momento, les parecerían nuevas por lo menos. Durante cincuenta segundos Maggie se sintió horriblemente vulgar a los ojos de su padre, en los que tenía fija su mirada dulce y falsa, aunque sin que le importara, por estimar que mucha suerte tendría si conseguía sus propósitos sin padecer algo peor que ser vulgar.

Maggie había dicho:

—Y he pensado que esto gustaría más a Americo que hacer el viaje solo.

—¿Quieres decir que no irá de viaje si no va conmigo?

Estas palabras la indujeron a pensar, y jamás en su vida había pensado tan deprisa y con tanta aplicación como ahora. Si contestaba afirmativamente a las palabras de su padre, su marido, puesto en semejante brete, podía muy bien desmentirla, con lo que ¿acaso lo anterior no produciría el efecto de intrigar a su padre, de inducirle quizá a preguntarle directamente por qué razón obraba ella de esta manera? Desde luego, Maggie no podía permitirse que se sospechara de ella, ni siquiera por un instante, ni que ejercía presión alguna, y esto la obligó a preguntar, por toda respuesta:

—¿No crees que esto es precisamente lo que tienes que averiguar hablando con él?

—Efectivamente, siempre y cuando me haga la propuesta. Pero todavía no lo ha hecho.

Una vez más, ella se dio cuenta de que estaba en una falsa situación:

—Bueno, quizá no se atreva.

—¿Tan segura estás de que desea viajar conmigo?

—Creo que piensa que te gustaría.

—Pues sí, claro…

Pero el señor Verver apartó la mirada, y Maggie contuvo el aliento en espera de que su padre preguntara si quería que él lo propusiera directamente a Americo, o le preguntara si iba a sentirse muy desilusionada en el caso de que decidiera olvidar el asunto. Lo que la tranquilizó fue que su padre no hizo ni lo uno ni lo otro, con lo cual se mantuvo apartado del riesgo anejo de intentar sonsacarle los motivos que la animaban. Además, por otra parte, para mitigar esta impresión, y con el fin de llenar aquel vacío tan grande creado tan discretamente por su abstención, el señor Verver dio a su hija una razón que explicaba su comportamiento, evitándole con ello el esfuerzo de preguntarle si, a su juicio, Charlotte no aprobaría su proyecto. El señor Verver había cargado con la responsabilidad de todo, y esto era lo que tranquilizaba a Maggie. Muy poco más tuvo que esperar para comprender cómo su padre asumía todas aquellas responsabilidades. Lo que él expresó fue sus pocos deseos de poner tiempo y espacio, en tan grande escala, entre él y su esposa. No, su vida con Charlotte no era desdichada, ni mucho menos, hasta el punto de inducirle a insinuar que necesitaba el alivio de una separación temporal, y Maggie recordaría que su padre la había sonreído paternalmente mirándola a través de las lentes de sus gafas que, en cierto modo, parecían protegerla, para subrayar el significado de sus palabras. En consecuencia, a no ser que fuera el Príncipe quien necesitara aquel alivio… A cuya observación, Maggie repuso:

—No, no creo que éste sea el caso de Americo. Nuestra vida en común se desarrolla a la perfección.

—Bueno, pues no hay problema.

Maggie asintió una vez más, con sublime aceptación:

—No hay problema.

Alegremente, su padre observó:

—Mi vida con Charlotte también se desarrolla a la perfección.

Después, el señor Verver causó la impresión de guardar silencio con el fin de ganar tiempo; y, por fin, en tono leve y feliz, añadió:

—¡Y esto es lo menos que puedo decir! ¡Ciertamente, lo menos!

Y habló como si pudiera decirlo mucho mejor sin el menor esfuerzo, como si el buen humor bastara en la presente ocasión para tener la satisfacción de expresar mucho menos de lo que la realidad merecía. De esta manera puso el asunto ya de manera plenamente consciente, ya con total inconsciencia, en manos de Charlotte. El caso fue que se hizo mayormente opresiva la convicción que Maggie tenía de los proyectos de Charlotte. Había hecho lo que quería hacer la esposa de su padre, que era exactamente lo que Americo la había obligado a hacer a ella. Charlotte había conseguido que la prueba que había deseado hacer resultara prácticamente imposible y, por el contrario, Charlotte había puesto en práctica su propia prueba. Era como si ésta hubiera sabido que su hijastra tendría miedo a que se la invitara a decir, mediante las preguntas menos intencionadas, por qué razón consideraba que era deseable un cambio. Para nuestra joven amiga también era lo mismo; resultaba todavía más prodigioso que si su padre hubiera sido capaz de hacer cálculos armónicos con lo anterior, hubiera sido capaz de concluir que era importante no pedirle a ella que le dijera cuáles eran sus problemas. Si no fuera así, ¿por qué no se lo había preguntado al deparársele semejante ocasión? Sí, aquello era fruto de un cálculo premeditado. Ahí se encontraba la razón. El señor Verver estaba aterrado de la pregunta que la suya propia hubiera podido provocar: «Ya que abordas este asunto, ¿cuáles son, papá, tus problemas?». Pocos segundos después, cuando el señor Verver complementó el sentido de su última frase mediante una o dos leves observaciones encaminadas a alejar el fantasma de lo anómalo en su vivir, en ese momento crítico Maggie no hubiera debido contestar la pregunta:

—¿No crees que nuestra vida parece estar dominada por algo parecido a un hechizo? ¿Y que parece que en los últimos tiempos este hechizo haya quedado renovado, haya despertado de un letargo? Quizá se trate de cierta prosperidad perversa y egoísta, como si nos hubiéramos apoderado de todo, como si todo lo tuviéramos ordenadamente en nuestro poder, hasta el último objeto bello para la última vitrina en el último rincón de mi colección. Quizá esto sea la causa de que nos hayamos vuelto un tanto perezosos, un poco lánguidos, como un grupo de dioses que no se ocupan de la humanidad.

Rápidamente, inducida por la leve lindeza de estas palabras, Maggie repuso:

—¿Consideras que somos retraídos? ¿Crees que no nos ocupamos de la humanidad, viviendo como

vivimos en la concentración humana más grande del mundo y yendo constantemente de un lado para otro, siempre perseguidos y siempre persiguiendo?

Estas palabras le hicieron pensar al señor Verver un poco más de lo que su hija había pretendido; pero, como ella misma hubiera dicho, la respuesta fue sonriente:

—Bueno, pues no lo sé. En realidad, lo que tú dices sólo diversión nos proporciona.

—Ciertamente. Sólo diversión.

—Todo lo hacemos de una manera muy hermosa.

Maggie no hubiera negado esto siquiera por un instante:

—Todo lo hacemos de una manera muy hermosa. Comprendo lo que quieres decir.

El señor Verver prosiguió:

—Y con ello también quiero decir que no tenemos, en la medida suficiente, idea de lo que son dificultades.

—¿En la medida suficiente? ¿Suficiente para qué?

—Suficiente para no ser egoístas.

—Jamás te he considerado egoísta.

Maggie consiguió decir estas palabras sin que su voz tuviera tono de compunción.

—No digo que yo sea egoísta, ni que lo seas tú, o Americo, o Charlotte. Pero, conjuntamente considerados, somos egoístas, actuamos como un grupo egoísta. Como habrás podido observar, siempre queremos una misma cosa, y esto nos une, nos ata los unos a los otros.

Hizo una pausa, y añadió:

—Nos necesitamos los unos a los otros; pero, en cada ocasión, cada uno necesita al otro para cada uno. Esto es lo que he calificado de feliz hechizo; pero, al mismo tiempo, quizá sea también una inmoralidad.

En tono divertido, como un eco, Maggie repitió:

—¿Una «inmoralidad»?

—Somos tremendamente morales, con respecto a nosotros mismos, es decir, cada cual para el otro, y no voy a fingir que sé con exactitud a costa de quién tú y yo, por ejemplo, somos felices. Sin embargo, me atrevería a decir que, a fin de cuentas, hay un leve matiz agobiante, un poco extraño, en esa conciencia de la comodidad y los privilegios de que gozamos, en términos generales. A no ser, claro está, que lo que acabo de decir sólo se me pueda aplicar a mí. De todas maneras, esto era lo que quería decir, o sea, que vivimos de una manera que «reblandece», igual que si fuéramos individuos con coleta, recostados en divanes dedicados a fumar opio y tener visiones. «Levantémonos y actuemos», ¿no es eso lo que dice Longfellow? Éstas son las palabras que a veces suenan en mis oídos, produciéndome un efecto parecido al de la entrada de la policía en el fumadero de opio, para sacudirnos hasta sacarnos del sopor. Pero, al mismo tiempo, lo hermoso de nuestra forma de vivir es que realmente actuamos. Sí, a fin de cuentas estamos haciendo lo que nos propusimos. Estamos en trance de lograr, de lograr nuestra vida, de lograr nuestras oportunidades, o lo que sea, tal como lo entendemos o lo sentimos al principio. Lo hemos logrado ¿y qué más podemos hacer?

De ahí, el señor Verver concluyó:

—Para mí significa mucho el haber hecho tan feliz a Charlotte, haber conseguido que esté tan absolutamente satisfecha. Tú has dejado de preocuparme desde hace mucho tiempo; quiero decir que sabía sobradamente que eras feliz, por lo que jamás tuve que ocultarte que mi mayor empeño, desde que supe que eras feliz, ha sido conseguir lo mismo de manera casi inevitable, lo cual redunda asimismo en beneficio tuyo. Y si hemos logrado nuestra vida, nuestra idea, como antes he dicho, si ahora puedo estar sentado aquí y decir que he contribuido a ello, no cabe afirmar que el hecho de conseguir que Charlotte viva tan felizmente haya coadyuvado poco en ello. Esto ha tenido efectos benéficos en todo momento, esto ha sido la mayor voluta de humo azul, o del color que sea, del opio. ¿No te das cuenta del marasmo en que hubiéramos caído si Charlotte no hubiera venido y no hubiera encajado en nuestro vivir, tal como lo ha hecho?

Para rematar sus palabras, miró a Maggie como si fuera a decirle algo en que ésta realmente no había pensado:

—En ese caso, hija mía, estoy convencido de que tú hubieras sido quien más lo hubiera odiado.

Intrigada, Maggie preguntó:

—¿Odiado qué?

—Hubieras odiado que, a pesar de nuestras tremendas buenas intenciones, no hubiésemos conseguido nuestros propósitos. Y me atrevo a decir que yo lo hubiera sentido más por ti que por mí.

—Esto me parece natural, puesto que por mí lo hiciste. El señor Verver dudó unos instantes, y dijo:

—Pero no te lo dije.

—Bueno, poco tardó en decírmelo la propia Charlotte.

El padre de Maggie observó:

—Tampoco a ella se lo dije.

Maggie, inmediatamente, le preguntó:

—¿Estás realmente seguro?

—Me gusta pensar que quedé totalmente prendado de ella, y que tenía todas las razones para estarlo, y en la gran suerte que tuve al poder contar con esta base. Y dije a Charlotte todas las buenas cualidades que a mi juicio tenía.

—El hecho de que Charlotte fuera capaz de una tan perfecta comprensión era una de sus cualidades.

—Sí, lo comprendió todo.

—Todo, y principalmente tus motivos. El hecho de que me lo dijera me demostró su comprensión.

Ahora volvían a estar frente a frente, y Maggie vio que el color del rostro de su padre se avivaba. Fue como si el señor Verver viera en los ojos de Maggie las imágenes concretas, la escena de la conversación de su hija con Charlotte, de la que ahora el señor Verver oía hablar por primera vez, y con respecto a la cual, por razones naturales, hubiera debido interrogar más a fondo a Maggie. El que el señor Verver no lo hiciera no hacía más que revelar la complicación de sus temores. Por fin, el señor Verver dijo:

—Lo que realmente le gusta a Charlotte es el éxito habido.

—¿El éxito de tu matrimonio?

—Sí, bueno, de mi idea, considerada globalmente. El modo en que he quedado justificado. Ésta es, realmente, la satisfacción que le doy. Aunque, desde luego, si el matrimonio hubiera fracasado, jamás hubiera cabido atribuir culpa alguna a Charlotte.

Sin embargo, como si realmente no mereciera la pena hablar de esto, el señor Verver calló. Y el hilo de sus pensamientos quedó roto. Ahora, preguntó:

—Bueno, ¿y consideras que puedes arriesgarte a ir a Fawns?

—¿Lo consideras un riesgo?

—Bueno, desde un punto de vista moral, desde aquel punto de vista de que antes te he hablado, desde el punto de vista de hundirnos más en la inactividad. No sé por qué, cuando estamos allá, nuestro egoísmo parece que crece.

Maggie permitió que su padre gozara de la diversión que le proporcionaba el que ella no hiciera comentario a esta última observación y, sencillamente, preguntó:

—¿Está Charlotte realmente dispuesta a ir?

El señor Verver, sintiéndose ahora más a sus anchas, repuso:

—Bueno, siempre y cuando tú, yo y Americo queramos ir. Cuando se acosa a Charlotte con preguntas, siempre se descubre que lo único que quiere saber es cuáles son nuestros deseos. ¡Para esto la tenemos!

Y después de intercambiar estas frases, a pesar de cierto extraño efecto que produjeron en la mayor o menor tranquilidad en que habían conseguido hallarse, abandonaron el tema. Lo abandonaron hasta el momento en que Maggie observó que era maravilloso que su madrastra estuviera dispuesta, antes de que la temporada social de la primavera terminara, a sustituir tan intensa vida social por tan relativa soledad. A estas palabras el señor Verver repuso:

—Creo que esto se debe a que ella estima que, en esta ocasión, tendremos en casa, en el campo, a más invitados de los que hasta ahora hemos tenido. ¿Recuerdas que al principio invitamos a Charlotte debido, precisamente, a nuestros invitados?

—Sí, para que animase un poco nuestro vivir.

Maggie había recordado aquellos tiempos, y la luz de la antigua franqueza entre ella y su padre, alumbrándola desde tan lejos, pareció revelar algunas cosas de una manera tan extraña que la nitidez de la visión le obligó a ponerse bruscamente en pie. Dijo:

—Bueno, en Fawns, con un poco de «vida», se estará bien.

El señor Verver no se había movido de su asiento; Maggie dirigía la vista por encima de su cabeza, y el cuadro que se le ofrecía quedaba densamente poblado. La vibración era la propia de una de aquellas sacudidas del místico tren en el que Maggie viajaba con su padre; pero, en esta ocasión, tuvo que recuperar el equilibrio y asentar bien los pies en el suelo antes de mirar a su padre a los ojos. Midió en toda su extensión la diferencia que mediaba entre ir a Fawns porque cada uno de ellos sabía que los otros deseaban

ir, y emparejar a su padre y a su marido para que efectuaran un viaje, lo cual nadie sabía que alguien quisiera. «Más gente» en Fawns daría lugar al desarrollo de la clase de actividad a que su marido y su madrastra se dedicaban. En realidad, a su padre y a ella no les quedaba más remedio que aceptar buen número de visitantes. Ahora nadie intentaría casar a su padre. Lo que él acababa de decir era una directa petición de arreglar de esta manera las cosas y ¿qué era esta petición sino un acto de sumisión a Charlotte? Sentado, el señor Verver se había percatado de la mirada de su hija; pero en el mismo instante el señor Verver también se había levantado, y este hecho recordó al uno y al otro que habían ido allá para reunirse con el niño. Efectuada la reunión con el Principino y su acompañante, los cuatro se dirigieron a casa caminando más despacio, todavía más vago el pensamiento, vaguedad que permitió a Maggie abordar de nuevo durante un instante el tema que le preocupaba:

—Si tenemos invitados en la casa de campo, como tú has dicho, ¿sabes a quién me haría ilusión, principalmente, invitar? Te vas a reír. A los Castledean.

—Comprendo. ¿Pero por qué has dicho que iba a reírme?

—Bueno, es que incluso a mí me da risa. Lady Castledean no me gusta; sin embargo, me gusta verla. Lo cual, como dice Americo, es raro.

El señor Verver le preguntó:

—¿Y no te parece bella esa señora?

—Sí, pero no se trata de eso.

—¿De qué se trata, pues?

—Sencillamente, se trata de tenerla allí ante nosotros. Es como si lady Castledean tuviera un valor, como si pudiera rendir algo. Desde luego, no sé qué es lo que puede rendir, además esta señora me irrita un poco. Reconozco que realmente no sé a qué se debe lo que he dicho, pero creo que si la vemos a menudo llegaré a saberlo.

Mientras seguían avanzando el señor Verver preguntó:

—¿Y lo consideras muy importante?

Maggie dudó, y en vez de contestar preguntó:

—¿Tanto te gusta esa señora?

El señor Verver también esperó un poco antes de contestar, hasta que por fin adivinó el sentido de la pregunta de su hija y repuso:

—Pues sí, me gusta.

Maggie lo aceptó considerándolo el primer caso entre cuantos podía recordar en que una persona determinada no causaba la misma impresión a su padre que a ella. Lo cual quizá pudiera atribuirse a una ficción del señor Verver. Pero Maggie ya se había comprometido mucho con sus palabras, y para aumentar todavía más la impresión de ligereza que había causado, añadió que, a pesar de que no constituían una novedad, ni mucho menos, también deseaba la presencia, en Fawns, de los Assingham. Con estas palabras todo quedó sobre una base independiente de las explicaciones; sin embargo, al mismo tiempo resultaba extraordinario advertir lo mucho que, una vez en el campo, en compañía de los otros, iba a necesitar a la buena de Fanny tal como decían al hablar en familia. Era rarísimo, pero parecía que la señora Assingham pudiera, en cierta manera, atenuar la intensidad de la conciencia que Maggie tenía de Charlotte. Parecía que ésta y Fanny se compensaran recíprocamente, cada cual con su peso, de acuerdo con sus ideas acerca del equilibrio. Sería lo mismo que poner a su amiga en su propio platillo de la balanza, en aquel platillo en que se encontraban su padre y ella. Americo y Charlotte estarían en otro platillo. De manera que el peso de los tres se conservaría al mismo nivel que el otro platillo. Mientras Maggie esbozaba estas imágenes en su mente, recibió de repente la ayuda de su padre:

—¡Y tanto que sí! ¡Tenemos que invitar a los Assingham!

—Los tendremos en casa igual que los teníamos antes durante una temporada larga, en las mismas condiciones que antes, como «clientes habituales», como solía decir Fanny. Si es que aceptan.

—Como clientes habituales, sí, en las mismas condiciones que antes, esto es lo que también me gustaría a mí.

Después de decir estas palabras, añadió:

—Y me parece que aceptarán.

En el tono en que el señor Verver pronunció estas palabras, Maggie vio diversos significados. El principal consistía en que el señor Verver estimaba que iba a necesitar a los Assingham tanto como la propia Maggie. Preconocer que las nuevas condiciones eran diferentes a las antiguas ¿qué era sino confesar

prácticamente que algo había ocurrido, y advertir que la señora Assingham, interesada en la situación que ella había contribuido a crear, prestaría en la misma medida atención a su desarrollo y variaciones? Equivalía a una insinuación efectuada por el señor Verver, en un momento en que se hallaba desprevenido, de que le gustaría tener a alguien a quien recurrir. Maggie había querido sondear disimuladamente a su padre; pero éste ahora había revelado claramente sus sentimientos y si Maggie, incluso al principio, había necesitado más elementos que la tranquilizaran, ahora los tenía sobrados. Mientras iban de regreso a casa, el señor Verver llevaba de la mano a su nieto y ellos seguían su paso, balanceando el brazo del niño sin que le diera la lata, como nunca hacía con su encrespamiento, igual que un pequeño y gordo puerco espín, con estridentes signos de interrogación; de modo que, mientras avanzaban, Maggie volvió a preguntarse si el equilibrio no hubiera sido más real y, sobre todo, no hubiera exigido tan insólitos estudios, si el destino hubiera decretado que Charlotte diera un Principino al señor Verver. Maggie había vuelto a cogerse del otro brazo de su padre, aunque en esta ocasión le arrastraba camino de vuelta, suave e irremediablemente, hacia aquello de lo que habían intentado alejarse durante una hora, de la misma manera que el señor Verver arrastraba conscientemente al niño, y de la misma manera que la altiva señorita Bogle, a la izquierda de Maggie, representante de los deberes del hogar, la arrastraba a ella. Los deberes del hogar quedaron de manifiesto cuando la casa de Portland Place reapareció ante su vista incluso desde lejos. Americo y Charlotte habían regresado a casa —mejor dicho, Americo había regresado, y Charlotte había salido de la suya— y los dos se encontraban juntos en el balcón, Americo con la cabeza descubierta, Charlotte sin la chaqueta, la capa o lo que fuera, aunque coronada por un brillante y audaz sombrero, acorde con el tibio día, que Maggie inmediatamente descubrió que era nuevo, insuperablemente original, lucido, en generosa armonía por vez primera. Y todo era para contemplar el regreso de los ausentes y estar allí para hacerse cargo de ellos con la mayor prontitud posible. Estaban los dos alegres y divertidos en la placentera mañana, se inclinaron sobre la baranda para gritar desde arriba su bienvenida, iluminando la fachada de la gran casa negruzca con una expresión que quebró la monotonía, que casi hubiera podido escandalizar la decencia de Portland Place. El grupo que se hallaba abajo, en la calle, alzó la vista como si la dirigiera a seres apostados en las almenas de un castillo, e incluso la señorita Bogle, que iba con la cabeza sumamente erguida, quedó con el aliento un tanto cortado como si verdaderamente tuviera ante la vista a seres superiores. Difícilmente pudo haber bocas más abiertas desde aquellas rondallas que en la Nochebuena tan lamentablemente cantaban por calderilla, cuando Americo, insaciable en cuanto hiciera referencia a las costumbres inglesas, salió de casa exclamando por lo bajo una «*Santissima Vergine*!» para maravillarse ante los depositarios de semejante tradición y comprar su indulgencia. El respingo particular de Maggie fue de nuevo inevitable al pensar en la tarea que aquella pareja podía llevar a cabo.

Capítulo XXX

Durante varias semanas Maggie no había vuelto a tener ante sí y de manera tan eficaz la presencia de Fanny Assingham como aquella tarde en que esta dama regresó de su estancia en Matcham durante las fiestas de Pentecostés, pero el paréntesis quedó cerrado tan pronto el día de la migración a Fawns —el más o menos simultáneo traslado de ambos hogares allá— comenzó a ser objeto de conversación. Maggie se dio cuenta inmediatamente de que la renovación de las antiguas condiciones de que había hablado con su padre, con una vieja amiga, representaba para su espíritu la única manifestación que no la ponía excesivamente en evidencia ni la traicionaba. Ni siquiera su padre, quien siempre había «creído», como él decía, en su antigua aliada, llegaría forzosamente a sospechar que Maggie invocaba la ayuda de Fanny en vista a determinadas pesquisas, y menos aún sería así en el caso de que Fanny se comportara como fácilmente era capaz de comportarse. El concepto que tenía de la capacidad de Fanny podría alterarla si le fuera revelado de repente, y debemos decir que la señora Assingham estaba destinada a alterarse en breve, a raíz de una revelación de esta naturaleza, a pesar de ser relativamente lejana. Concretamente, la idea de nuestra joven amiga consistía en que su seguridad, su salvación de que de ella sospechara que sospechaba se encontraría en la capacidad que su amiga tenía para encubrir, para proteger y, dado el caso, incluso para representarla ostentosamente, es decir, para representar la relación que tenía con aquella forma de vida que todos llevaban ahora. Sin duda alguna, esto sería mucho decir, como reza la frase popular, pero la señora Assingham existía básicamente o cabía la posibilidad de hacer lo preciso para que primordialmente existiera para el particular beneficio de Maggie, y esto era una de las más hermosas flores que había obtenido de entre las sugerencias sembradas en ocasión del agasajo ofrecido en Portland Place al grupo de invitados a Matcham. En aquella velada la señora Assingham, reaccionando contra el hundimiento de su espíritu, había rebosado valentía y comprensión, y de una forma absoluta, quizá temeraria en cuanto a ella concernía, había revelado sus profundas y tenebrosas preocupaciones, impresión que ahora, por ser demasiado tarde, la señora Assingham ya no podía borrar. Con maravilloso aire de reconocer todas estas verdades, ahora la Princesa volvió a abordar a la señora Assingham, aunque dando muestras al principio de tener los debidos escrúpulos de decir a Fanny qué era concretamente lo que de ella esperaba, pero sin avergonzarse en modo alguno, como de expresa manera declaró, de la perceptible intuición que Fanny tuvo de los extraños servicios que quizá Maggie le pidiera. Realmente, desde el principio Maggie dijo a Fanny palabras extraordinarias: «Usted puede ayudarme, querida; nadie más puede hacerlo». «Le doy mi palabra de que casi deseo que le ocurra algo malo, que pierda la salud, que pierda su fortuna o que pierda su reputación (y perdóneme por ello, querida), a fin de poder estar en su compañía todo lo que deseo que usted lo esté en la mía, sin provocar comentarios como no sea el de que esa clase de bondades son muy propias de mí». Todos nosotros tenemos nuestra propia manera de compensar nuestra falta de egoísmo, y Maggie carecía de todo género de egoísmo en lo que hacía referencia a su marido y a su padre, sólo un egoísmo débil y vacilante en lo que tocara a su madrastra. En esta concreta crisis era perfectamente capaz de contemplar sin pestañear cómo la vida personal y la libertad de la señora Assingham eran sacrificadas.

La actitud que estos deseos provocaban en Maggie consistía en sacar provecho de las actuales agitaciones y preocupaciones de su víctima. En realidad, estimaba que este personaje está dispuesto a cualquier cosa, quizá sin hacer efusivas protestas de lealtad, aunque sí buscando, con una inquietud

peculiarmente suya, saber qué era lo que Maggie quería. A la larga —aunque no fue tan a la larga como eso —, no hubo dificultad alguna en hacérselo saber. Fue como si, de una manera clara, Maggie hubiera dado a entender a la señora Assingham que la consideraba culpable de algo, que le atribuía una responsabilidad, aun cuando, al principio, Maggie no puso los puntos sobre las íes, ni ató todos los cabos, sino que la trató sin insistencia, antes bien con suave confianza, como si la señora Assingham estuviera allí para ver, para saber, para aconsejar, para ayudar. Evidentemente, ante Maggie se había formado, por sí misma, la teoría de que nuestra buena mujer había intervenido, desde el principio, en el destino de ellos cuatro, de tal modo que no había giro alguno en sus recíprocas relaciones y negocios cuyo origen no pudiera hallarse, en cierta medida, en el afectuoso y propio interés de la señora Assingham por ellos. Sobre la base de este afectuoso interés de la buena señora, nuestra joven amiga levantaba ahora un edificio sin dejar de observar a Fanny, de manera muy parecida a aquella en que un niño listo, e incluso travieso, jugando sentado en el suelo, amontona piezas de madera, hábil y pasmosamente, sin dejar de observar la cara de una persona mayor que le vigila disimuladamente. Cuando las piezas de madera cayeran, se comportarían como es propio de la naturaleza de las piezas de madera; sin embargo, llegaría antes el momento en que se alzarían hasta un punto tan elevado que la estructura forzosamente tendría que llamar la atención y ser admirada. Entretanto, en el comportamiento de entrega sin reservas adoptado por la señora Assingham no se advertían indicios de análisis que separara y revelara aspectos concretos. El gesto de ansiosa atención de su rostro iba totalmente dirigido a la vívida felicidad de su joven amiga, y revelaba que la señora Assingham daba por supuesto que recientemente y por vagas causas dicha felicidad había aumentado. La Princesa ahora avanzaba, avanzaba y avanzaba más que antes; la señora Assingham estaba plenamente dispuesta a manifestar que se daba plena cuenta de los avances de la Princesa, que siempre había sabido que tarde o temprano avanzaría y toda invitación a participar en tal avance forzosamente tenía que contener, en mayor o menor medida, una nota de triunfo. Sin duda alguna había cierta inexpresividad en la sumisión de la señora Assingham, y también cierta prodigalidad en su general alegría, siendo ésta más notable cuando las dos volvían a reunirse después de breves separaciones; en estas reuniones, durante los primeros momentos de efusión, Maggie a veces recordaba otras expresiones en otras caras, sobre todo dos imborrables expresiones: la de la luz que había alterado la cara de su marido al tener la fuerte impresión —por fin Maggie había llegado a emplear el término «fuerte impresión» al hablar de ello— de verla, cual ella estaba, al regresar el Príncipe de Matcham y de Gloucester, y la expresión intrigada en la bella, inquieta y audaz mirada de Charlotte cuando, a la mañana siguiente en Eaton Square, esta vieja amiga había dado la espalda a la ventana para comenzar a entendérselas con ella.

Si Maggie hubiera osado pensar de tan ruda manera, hubiera dicho que Fanny le tenía miedo; Fanny temía que dijera o hiciera algo, tal como durante breves segundos había temido Americo y Charlotte, lo cual venía a ser un elemento expresivo común a los tres. Sin embargo, la diferencia consistía en que esta expresión, en el caso de la buena señora, tenía la rareza de renovarse constantemente, en tanto que en los otros dos no se había repetido ni una sola vez. Otras expresiones habían aparecido como luces radiantes y fijas en los otros dos, expresiones que alcanzaron un punto culminante hacía muy poco tiempo; aquella mañana en que la pareja apareció en el balcón de la casa para averiguar desde lo alto lo que su padre y ella habían estado haciendo, momento en que la general e interesante belleza y brillantez de la pareja armonizaba con el inicio del verano, había parecido irradiar calor, bienvenida y la promesa de protección. De consuno habían decidido no hacer nada que pudiera alarmar a Maggie; y ahora, dotados de experiencia y práctica, lo hacían de una manera tal que ya no temían que su comportamiento los traicionara. Contrariamente, la señora Assingham, no menos indiferente a lo ocurrido, tenía menos seguridad por tener menos dominio de sí misma. En consecuencia, la estridencia de la alegría de dicha señora, los intentos de sondeo en el pretendidamente agradable ambiente que precedía a su indagación, como la patrulla de exploradores o lo que sean precede al grueso de la fuerzas, todo esto, fue la causa de que a los labios de nuestra joven amiga acudiera, al cabo de un par de semanas, diez o doce veces una frase de reto que tuvo la astucia de guardar para la ocasión propicia, pero que el haberla dicho le hubiera causado un alivio del que se sentía no poco necesitada. «Tiene usted tanto temor a que pueda formularle quejas que no hace más que lanzar todas las campanas al vuelo para que ahoguen mi voz; pero no grite, querida amiga, antes de que la hayan herido; sobre todo, pregúntese a sí misma si cree que soy lo bastante perversa para quejarme. Incluso dejando que su imaginación se desborde, ¿de qué puede usted soñar que soy capaz de quejarme?» Sin embargo, la Princesa consiguió por el momento no pronunciar palabras como éstas, y lo consiguió gracias a preguntarse si la ambigüedad con que su amiga la trataba no seria ahora muy parecida a la ambigüedad con

que ella trataba a su padre. Maggie también se preguntaba si le gustaría que su padre le diera aquel tratamiento que ella, día tras día, había conseguido no dar a la señora Assingham, lo que la inducía a tratar a esta amiga con la misma amabilidad que el señor Verver, aquel bendito, tan benévolo como inexcusable, trataba a su hija. De todas maneras, Maggie había con seguido sonsacarle a la señora Assingham una promesa con respecto al tiempo que pasarían en Fawns, siempre y cuando el coronel cumpliera su palabra, y a este respecto nada le iluminó tanto ni nada le inspiró un interés más íntimo como advertir que su interlocutora se abstenía de manifestar que era preciso tener en cuenta lo que Charlotte opinaba de tan larga estancia en Fawns, incluso tratándose de aliados tales como los Assingham.

Fanny evitaba hacer semejante manifestación de una forma tan evidente para la Princesa, y tan consciente en la propia Fanny, que parecía hallarse en trance de retroceder ante un abismo en el que temiera precipitarse, lo que era una verdad que también contribuía a que nuestra joven amiga tuviera siempre presente el peligro de poner de manifiesto los sutiles procesos de que se servía. El hecho de que Charlotte comenzara a emplear un criterio restrictivo en lo tocante a los Assingham —cosa que por muchas y buenas razones que saltaban a la vista jamás había hecho con anterioridad— tenía el más alto valor para Maggie, valor que quedaba incrementado por el silencio flagrante con que la propia Fanny lo rodeaba. Y lo que expresaba, de manera sumamente excitante, la cuantía de este valor era precisamente la circunstancia de que Maggie quedaba en un estado de oposición con respecto a su madrastra —en el caso de que Maggie tuviera que defender la propuesta de una larga estancia de sus amigos— mucho más activo de lo que jamás había estado, aun cuando ello supusiera otorgar a la señora Verver una magnífica oportunidad para pedir explicaciones a su marido. Desde el momento en que Maggie quedara claramente situada en la oposición, no habría modo de saber hasta qué punto se multiplicarían las oportunidades de Charlotte. Obsesivamente se preguntaba qué haría su padre si su esposa, por una parte, comenzaba a presionarle para que llamara al orden a su hija, en tanto que, por otra parte, la fuerza de una vieja costumbre —para no decir más— le predisponía, con no menos razón, a tener fe en su hija. Además Maggie estaba aprisionada en el círculo formado por las razones que no podía dar, por lo menos a su padre. La mansión en el campo era de su padre y, en consecuencia, de Charlotte, y sólo era de Maggie y de Americo en la medida en que el dueño y la dueña la ponían generosamente a su disposición. Maggie se daba cuenta de que la generosidad de su padre carecía de límites, pero éste no podía ser el caso de Charlotte, para quien jamás sería decente, dicho sea teniéndolo todo en cuenta, reducir a tener que luchar por sus preferencias. Había momentos en que la Princesa no se sentía sin armas con que luchar, siempre y cuando la lucha se desarrollara sin espectadores.

Sin embargo, no podía utilizar esta ventaja, aunque fuera triste tener que reconocerlo. Su única arma consistía en que se daba cuenta de que si Charlotte no «quería» a los Assingham, sería por algún motivo razonable. En todo momento Maggie tenía a su disposición un medio con el que contestar a cualquier queja formulada por Charlotte, que a ella le trasladara su padre. A la posible pregunta de: «¿Cuáles son tus razones, querida?», Maggie podía lúcidamente contestar: «¿Y cuáles son las tuyas, querido papá? ¿No crees que vale la pena saberlas? ¿No será que por muy fundados motivos las razones de Charlotte se limitan a que le desagrada la presencia y, en consecuencia, la observación de personas que quizá saben de ella cosas que no le conviene que sepan?». En simple lógica, Maggie podía esgrimir esta repelente carta, y le constaba debido a que, a estas alturas, y gracias a los rápidos procesos lógicos que ahora seguía, conocía íntimamente todos los manoseados naipes que tenía a su disposición. Pero Maggie sólo podía jugar esta carta pagando el prohibitivo precio de sacrificar a su padre, un precio tan prohibitivo que incluso comportaba el horror de averiguar si su padre estaba dispuesto a ser sacrificado. Lo que Maggie tuviera que hacer tendría que hacerlo sin mezclar a su padre. Y nada había que tuviera menos en común con este escrúpulo como la despiadada utilización de su conformidad siempre beneficiosa, con que el espíritu de Maggie tan audazmente se gozaba. A este respecto, la Princesa no se veía objetivamente a sí misma, y sólo veía a los demás, ya que de lo contrario hubiera quedado impresionada, e incluso un tanto divertida, por su tranquila adopción de tan pesado comportamiento. Si Maggie podía enfrentarse con la embarazosa situación de la persistente presencia de sus amigos en Fawns, a pesar de Charlotte, en parte se debía a que de ellos esperaba que le inspirasen una valentía que aumentara la suya propia. En resumen, sus amigos no sólo debían hallar por sí mismos la aprobación y la audacia, sino que también debían encontrarlas para proporcionárselas a Maggie. Y tuvo la impresión de que nos les daba el tiempo suficiente para ello aquella tarde, en la casa de Portland Place, en que espetó a la señora Assingham la siguiente incongruencia, que sólo superficialmente lo era:

—¿Se puede saber qué clase de horror hay entre esos dos? ¿Qué supone usted, qué sabe?

Si Maggie se hubiera guiado por las caras, la súbita palidez que adquirió la de su visitante la hubiera llevado muy lejos. Fanny Assingham palideció, pero hubo algo en este cambio, en la expresión que con él apareció en sus ojos, que tuvo la virtud de reafirmar la convicción que ella ya tenía en lo tocante a lo que su amiga había estado esperando. Lo había visto venir, lo había visto venir desde lejos; ahora que por fin había llegado, tan pronto pasara la primera convulsión, y pasaría pronto sin la menor duda, se hallarían las dos en una situación más real. Había llegado y estaba allí, porque habían compartido las dos solas el almuerzo dominical; estaba allí, por raro que parezca, por el mal tiempo, la fría y perversa lluvia de junio que había estropeado el día; estaba allí a consecuencia de la suma total de aquellas perplejidades y duplicidades, entre las que nuestra joven amiga había avanzado últimamente; estaba allí porque Americo y Charlotte habían ido de nuevo, juntos y solos, a pasar el fin de semana en casa de unos amigos, visita que Maggie, con intención infernal, había promovido sólo para ver si, en esta ocasión, también eran capaces de hacerla; estaba allí porque Maggie había atraído a Fanny a su lado, después de evitar que efectuara una visita que evidentemente le hubiera gustado efectuar, y le había obligado a ir a almorzar a su casa, estúpida, vacía y aburridamente; todo ello animada por la intención de celebrar que el Príncipe y la señora Verver le hubieran conferido el poder de describirlos tal como realmente eran. A decir verdad, Maggie sintió bruscamente la necesidad, antes que nada, de determinar cómo eran; por otra parte, antes de que su invitada diera contestación a su pregunta, todo en aquel momento y lugar, todo en todas las circunstancias le pareció que proclamara a gritos cómo eran. La mirada de ignorancia de su invitada, sobre todo, fue lo primero que lo proclamó:

—¿Entre los dos? ¿Qué quiere decir?

—Algo que no debiera haber, algo que no hubiera debido haber durante todo ese tiempo. ¿Cree que hay algo? ¿Qué piensa?

Evidentemente, y para empezar, lo que Fanny pensaba era que su joven amiga la había dejado sin resuello; pero, a pesar de todo, la miró directamente a los ojos con gran fijeza:

—¿Habla basándose en una sospecha concebida por usted?

—Hablo basándome en una tortura. Perdone que se lo diga. He estado pensando durante meses y meses, y a nadie he podido recurrir para que me ayude a aclarar mis ideas, y he podido guiarme sólo por mis impresiones.

La señora Assingham dijo:

—Ha estado pensando durante meses y meses. Sí, pero, mi querida Maggie, ¿en qué ha estado pensando?

—Pues en cosas horrorosas, cual la pequeña bestia que quizá sea. Quizá no haya nada, nada malo y horroroso, nada que ocultar.

El color había comenzado a volver a la cara de la mayor de las dos mujeres. Ahora ya pudo enfrentarse, aun cuando efectuando un visible esfuerzo, no tan desconcertadamente con la pregunta que Maggie le había formulado:

—¿Imagina, hija mía, que los dos desdichados están enamorados? ¿Es esto lo que piensa?

Maggie la miró en silencio durante un rato antes de decir:

—Ayúdeme a descubrir qué es lo que imagino. Yo no lo sé. Sólo sé que vivo en una constante angustia. ¿No padece angustias usted? ¿Comprende lo que intento decir? Dígame la verdad, que esto, de una manera u otra, me ayudará.

La expresión de Fanny se había revestido de peculiar gravedad, de una plenitud que parecía infundirle esplendor:

—¿No quedará todo reducido a que siente celos de Charlotte? —¿Quiere decir eso que odio a Charlotte?

Maggie pensó, después de decir estas palabras, y añadió:

—No. Por papá.

La señora Assingham observó:

—Claro, es lo que cabía suponer. Pero yo le preguntaba si siente celos de ella por su marido, el Príncipe.

—Pues, bueno, quizá todo quede reducido a esto. Si soy desdichada es que estoy celosa. Quizá sea la misma cosa. Por lo menos, ante usted esta palabra no me da miedo. Sí, estoy celosa, vivo atormentada, y más atormentada todavía porque estoy indefensa. Cuando estoy atormentada e indefensa, me meto un pañuelo en la boca y lo conservo en la boca la mayor parte de la noche y del día. Por lo menos ante usted me he sacado el pañuelo de la boca, y aquí me tiene chillando.

Hizo una pausa, y terminó su parlamento diciendo:

—Están fuera y no pueden oírme, y por una milagrosa circunstancia no almuerzo con mi padre. Vivo constantemente rodeada de milagrosas circunstancias, aunque reconozco que la mitad de ellas son obra mía. Camino de puntillas, presto atención a todos los sonidos, mido mi aliento y, al mismo tiempo, procuro en todo momento causar la impresión de ser suave como antiguo satén de color rosa. ¿Ha pensado alguna vez que me hallara en este caso?

Su amiga sintió evidentemente la necesidad de expresarse con claridad:

—¿Celosa, desdichada y atormentada?

Y la señora Assingham, después de una pausa, prosiguió:

—No. Pero al mismo tiempo debo confesar, aunque quizá se ría de mí por ello, que jamás he estado tan tremendamente segura de saber cómo es usted. Ahí está usted ante mí, como he dicho, tan joven, tan profunda… Jamás hubiera imaginado que llevara una existencia envenenada, y como sea que usted desea saber si yo estimo si hay o no hay razón para ello, le diré que no tengo el menor inconveniente en hablar con usted aquí y ahora. No, nada me parecería más gratuito.

Después de estas palabras, las dos quedaron frente a frente durante un rato. Luego, Maggie se levantó con brusquedad, mientras su amiga seguía mayestáticamente sentada; después de pasear de arriba abajo llevada por la intensidad de sus sentimientos, ahora se detuvo para recibir la luz que había invocado. En estos momentos dicha luz se había acumulado de considerable manera alrededor de la amplia presencia de la señora Assingham, constituyendo incluso, según percibió nuestra joven amiga, un medio en el cual podía al fin respirar hondamente. Maggie preguntó:

—¿Durante estos meses, principalmente durante las últimas semanas, le he causado la impresión de estar serena, natural y desenvuelta?

Esta pregunta requería, de manera que difícilmente podemos calificar de imperceptible, una respuesta de cierta extensión:

—Jamás me ha causado la impresión, desde el primer instante en que la vi, de otra cosa que no fuera, muy a su manera, absoluta bondad, dulzura y belleza.

Casi en tono de caricia, la señora Assingham repitió:

—Como he dicho, muy a su manera, una manera que es suya y de nadie más. En usted no he pensado más que como en un ser ajeno a cuanto es feo, tan ignorante de cuanto es falsedad, crueldad o vulgaridad, que jamás podrá ser rozada ni jamás usted lo rozará. Nunca la he relacionado con esa clase de realidades. Y he tenido tiempo suficiente para ello, en el caso de que esas realidades parecieran hallarse junto a usted, pero no lo están. Y si esto es lo que usted quería saber, así se lo digo.

—¿Consideraba que vivía satisfecha porque me creía estúpida?

En el curso de su contestación, la señora Assingham mantuvo una espontánea sonrisa, quizá levemente disimulada por un grácil y menudo fruncir el ceño:

—Si la hubiera creído estúpida, no la hubiera considerado interesante; si no la hubiera considerado interesante, no me hubiera dado cuenta de si «sabía», como he dicho, cómo era usted, o no. Y siempre me he dado perfecta cuenta de que usted esconde, en algún lugar de su personalidad, no poco carácter.

Sonriendo, Fanny añadió:

—En realidad, todo el carácter que puede caber en una persona de su capacidad.

A continuación, Fanny explicó:

—Pero ocurría que como usted jamás atrajo la atención de los demás hacia su carácter, no tuve la ocasión de calibrarlo debidamente; además y sobre todo difícilmente hubiera podido determinar con exactitud en qué lugar llevaba el carácter o lo escondía. Sencillamente hubiera dicho que lo llevaba debajo, como aquella crucecita de plata que en cierta ocasión me mostró, con la bendición del Santo Padre, que siempre lleva oculta sobre la piel.

Dispuesta a ejercer el privilegio del ingenio, Fanny prosiguió:

—Sí, he podido echar una ojeada a esta reliquia, pero esa pequeña, preciosa y recóndita manera suya de ser, personal y áurea, que ha recibido la bendición de un poder que, creo, es superior incluso al Papa, ésa nunca ha accedido a mostrármela. Y mucho dudo que haya accedido a mostrarla a persona alguna. En términos generales, se ha comportado usted con excesiva modestia.

En sus esfuerzos para seguir el pensamiento de Fanny Assingham, Maggie casi consiguió que se le formara una rayita en la frente. Ahora, dijo:

—¿Y considera que hoy me comporto con modestia, mientras estoy aquí, chillando ante usted?

—¡Oh, sus gritos, lo reconozco, son cosa nueva! Tendré que averiguar en qué lugar encajan. Sin

embargo, el problema estriba en determinar con qué los voy a encajar.

Acto seguido, la señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿Ha querido usted decir que estas dos personas van a estar desde ayer hasta mañana en un lugar en el que pueden, más o menos irresponsablemente, reunirse? ¿Cree que están solos en dicho lugar, habiéndolo previsto de antemano?

Había hablado con el tono de pintar las cosas en los más tenebrosos colores posibles. Esperó en vano que Maggie contestara, y volvió a preguntar:

—Pero ¿no es más cierto que, en esta ocasión, después de que usted volviera a decir, a última hora, que no quería ir, ellos se mostraron remisos?

—Sí, es cierto, preferían no ir. Pero yo quería que fueran.

—En este caso, hija mía, ¿dónde está el problema?

—Quería ver si iban. Y, además, estaban obligados a ir. No les quedaba otro remedio.

La señora Assingham preguntó, intrigada:

—¿Debido a que usted y su padre decidieron no ir?

—No, no quería decir que tuvieran que ir en atención a los anfitriones, sino en atención a papá y a mí. Sí, porque ahora se han dado cuenta. Fanny tartajeó:

—¿Que se han «dado cuenta»?

—De que desde hace ya algún tiempo me fijo más. Me fijo en las cosas raras que hay en nuestra forma de vivir.

Maggie vio que su amiga estuvo, por un instante, a punto de preguntar le qué eran aquellas «cosas raras», pero enseguida la señora Assingham desechó tan ambigua pregunta para escoger otra que consideraba mucho mejor.

—¿Y por eso lo hizo? No ir, quiero decir.

—Sí, lo hice por eso. Para que quedaran solos los dos. Sí, porque de día en día muestran menos deseos, o se atreven a mostrar menos deseos, de estar solos. Desde hace mucho tiempo, lo disponen todo de manera que algunas veces tengan forzosamente que estar solos los dos.

Después, como sea que la señora Assingham, como cegada por la lucidez de estas palabras, se quedara callada, Maggie preguntó:

—¿Sigue creyendo que soy modesta?

Sin embargo, si se le daba tiempo, Fanny siempre podía pensar cualquier respuesta brillante susceptible de ser calificada de congruente, y así dijo:

—Creo que está usted equivocada. Ésta, querida, es mi respuesta a su pregunta. Su pregunta exige la respuesta más clara de que sea capaz. Nada malo veo y de nadie sospecho.

Como remate, añadió:

—Y me apena profundamente que otra sea su actitud.

Esto motivó que Maggie le dirigiera otra profunda mirada y le preguntara:

—¿Nunca ha imaginado nada?

—¡No lo permita el Señor! Y conste que le estoy hablando en mi calidad de mujer imaginativa. No hay ni un solo momento en mi vida en que no esté imaginando algo, y a esto se debe precisamente el que haya podido calibrar la sinceridad con que su marido, a quien usted supone torpemente dedicado a su madrastra, es devoto, tiernamente devoto, de su admirable y adorable esposa.

La señora Assingham hizo una larga pausa para que su joven amiga se empapara bien de lo anterior, pero Maggie no dio síntomas de hacerlo. Entonces la pobre mujer coronó lamentablemente sus esfuerzos:

—¡Sería incapaz de tocarle un pelo!

Al oír esto, en el rostro de Maggie se formó la más extraña expresión, aunque con la intención de esbozar una sonrisa:

—¡Bueno…!

Pero su invitada ya había dicho:

—Y estoy absolutamente segura de que Charlotte también.

Estas palabras tuvieron la virtud de dejarla con la extraña expresión fija en la cara, allí de pie. Y la Princesa dijo:

—No, Charlotte también sería incapaz. Y ésta es precisamente la razón por la que hoy han tenido que ir allá juntos. Tuvieron miedo de no hacerlo, miedo a que el hecho de no ir ellos me preocupara, me alterase, me pesara de una forma u otra. Y, como sea que yo insistí en que debían ir, en que no podíamos declinar

todos nosotros la invitación, a pesar de que papá y Charlotte realmente no la habían aceptado, al insistir yo tuvieron que ceder a su temor de que dar muestras de miedo a ir solos allá representara para ellos el mayor peligro, peligro que consistía, como usted puede fácilmente comprender, en que yo me sintiera traicionada. A los dos les consta que para ellos lo menos peligroso es seguir haciendo todas las cosas que yo he dado muestras de aceptar, y con respecto a las cuales no he dado indicios, en momento alguno, de no aceptar. Todo lo que les ha ocurrido a los dos les ha ocurrido de una manera extraordinaria, sin que yo haya revelado mi verdadero estado de ánimo, siquiera mediante un sonido, mediante un gesto; por tanto todo es cuan maravilloso quepa imaginar. De todas maneras, los dos avanzan por entre los peligros a que me he referido, entre el peligro de hacer demasiado y el de haber perdido la seguridad en sí mismos, el valor, o como quiera llamarlo, para hacer lo suficiente.

En este momento, el tono de las palabras de Maggie había adquirido un extraño matiz que no armonizaba con su sonrisa, lo cual quedó todavía más patente cuando concluyó:

—¡Y de esta manera consigo que hagan lo que yo quiero!

Estas palabras impresionaron a la señora Assingham, quien se levantó con una lentitud tal que, desde el inicio hasta el término del movimiento, reveló lo mucho que se había ampliado su comprensión del asunto. La señora Assingham dijo:

—Hija mía, es usted pasmosa.

—¿Pasmosa?

—Es usted terrible.

Meditativa, Maggie negó con la cabeza:

—No, no soy terrible, y usted tampoco piensa que lo soy. Sin duda alguna le causo la impresión de ser sorprendente, pero sorprendente por mi mansedumbre. ¿No lo ve? Soy mansa. Lo tolero todo.

La señora Assingham canturreó:

—Oh, tolerar, tolerar…

La Princesa dijo:

—Por amor.

Fanny dudó:

—¿A su padre?

Maggie repitió:

—Por amor.

Su amiga seguía intrigada:

—¿A su marido?

Una vez más, Maggie dijo:

—Por amor.

Durante unos instantes pareció que el tajante cariz de las palabras de Maggie hubiera sido la causa de que su amiga se encontrara en el caso de elegir entre dos o tres alternativas muy diferentes entre sí. Sin embargo, la contestación de la señora Assingham —tanto si era mucha como si era poca la libertad de elección— constituyó un triunfo:

—¿Acaso hablando con ese amor que la anima se ha propuesto convencerme de que está usted en la creencia de que su marido y la esposa de su padre son verdaderamente amantes el uno del otro?

Como la Princesa no contestó, por el momento, la señora Assingham dijo:

—¿A semejante alegación la llama usted «mansa»?

—Es que no pretendo comportarme con mansedumbre ante usted. Pero ya le he dicho, y usted ha tenido ocasiones sobradas de verlo, con cuánta mansedumbre me he portado con ellos.

La señora Assingham se encorajinó con más brillantez aún:

—¿De mansedumbre califica el obligarlos a hacer por medio del terror, como usted ha dicho, lo que usted quiere?

—Bueno, es que no sentirían terror si nada tuvieran que ocultar. La miró de frente y con gran fijeza le dijo:

—¿Se da usted cuenta, mi muy querida amiga, de lo que acaba de decir?

—Pues he dicho que estoy desorientada y atormentada, y que no tengo a nadie con quien hablar, salvo a usted. He pensado, y en realidad he llegado a convencerme de ello: que usted comprende hasta qué punto es verdad lo que acabo de decirle. Por eso pensé que haría causa común conmigo.

—¿Causa común en qué? ¿En acusar a dos personas, amigas desde hace largo tiempo, a las que siempre

he admirado inmensamente y a las que quiero, y contras las cuales no tengo fundamento para formular siquiera la sombra de una sospecha?

Maggie miró a Fanny Assingham con los ojos muy abiertos y dijo:

—Preferiría que me acusara a mí a que los acusara a ellos. Acúseme, acúseme a mí si encuentra la manera de hacerlo.

Había hablado exactamente como si sus palabras fueran reflejo de un debate que en su fuero interno hubiera sostenido consigo misma. Siguió:

—Si en conciencia puede acusarme, si en conciencia puede vilipendiarme, si en conciencia puede considerarme una pequeña cerda animada por malas pasiones…

Con aspecto de ponderar la cuestión, la señora Assingham dijo:

—¿Sí, qué?

Y guardó enfático silencio. Maggie prosiguió:

—En ese caso, creo que quedaré salvada.

Su amiga sopesó estas palabras durante un rato, mientras meditativa levantaba los ojos, realmente trascendentes, dirigiendo la mirada por encima de la cabeza de Maggie. Por fin, dijo:

—Dice que no tiene a nadie con quien hablar, y afirma que ha ocultado sus sentimientos de manera que jamás se ha traicionado, como usted ha venido a decir. Ahora bien, ¿nunca ha pensado que habiendo llegado a este punto de agitación, no sólo es su derecho sino también su ineludible deber hablar con su marido?

Maggie dijo:

—Ya lo he hecho.

La señora Assingham desorbitó los ojos:

—Ah, en ese caso no es verdad que no haya mostrado síntoma alguno. Después de un silencio, Maggie observó:

—No le he creado problemas, no he hecho una escena, no he adoptado una posición determinada, nada le he reprochado, de nada le he acusado. Ahora usted me dirá que esta forma de actuar es, en cierta manera, perversa.

Como si no pudiera evitarlo, Fanny dejó escapar:

—¡Oh!

—Pero, aunque parezca raro, estoy segura de que mi marido no me considera perversa. Creo que, en el fondo, y esto es lo más raro, me tiene lástima. Sí creo que en el fondo, se apiada de mí.

Su amiga le preguntó:

—¿Por el estado de ánimo en que usted se ha dejado hundir?

—Por no ser feliz cuando tanto tengo al alcance de la mano para serlo. Rápidamente, la señora Assingham observó:

—Lo tiene todo.

Pero después de decir estas palabras, Fanny Assingham guardó unos instantes de silencio, como si no osara continuar; pero al fin, dijo:

—De todas maneras, no comprendo cómo es posible que si usted no ha hecho nada…

La impaciencia de Maggie la interrumpió:

—No he hecho absolutamente nada.

—Bueno, pues en ese caso…

Al cabo de un rato, Maggie dijo:

—Bueno, mi marido sabe lo que he hecho.

Fue por esto que la señora Assingham guardó un silencio no menos prolongado que el guardado antes por Maggie, del que fueron causas coadyuvantes el tono empleado por ésta, su exquisita expresión y aquel silencio que, por su misma duración, tuvo inevitablemente cierto matiz de aceptación de una verdad. Luego, preguntó:

—¿Y qué ha hecho él?

Maggie también tardó en contestar:

—Se portó con esplendidez.

—¿Esplendidez? Entonces, ¿qué más quiere?

Maggie exclamó:

—¡Lo que ya sabe! ¡No tener miedo!

Una vez más, la señora Assingham se vio obligada a hacer un alto el fuego:

—¿No tener miedo a hablar?

—No tener miedo a no hablar.

Después de meditar un poco más, la señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿Ni siquiera con Charlotte puede hablar?

Al oír estas palabras, Maggie le dirigió una mirada y dio media vuelta sobre sí misma, en movimiento de reprimida desesperación, lo que motivó que la señora Assingham se contuviera, limitándose a contemplar con pena y lástima, cómo Maggie se acercaba a la ventana y dirigía la vista al monótono espectáculo de la calle. Casi parecía que se hubiera visto obligada a renunciar, al no hallar inteligente comprensión en su amiga —el último desengaño que tenía—, al perder la esperanza de aquel concreto consuelo que había buscado. Sin embargo, en el mismo momento Fanny volvió a adoptar el tono que le parecía entrañar más promesas de no obligarla a renuncia alguna:

—Lo comprendo, lo comprendo; en este caso concreto debería tener en consideración demasiadas cosas.

Estas palabras motivaron que la Princesa diera otra media vuelta sobre sí misma como si acabara de oír la nota de comprensión en que más deseaba ampararse. La señora Assingham añadió:

—No tenga miedo.

Maggie quedó quieta y en silencio, y poco después pudo expresar lo que sentía:

—Muchas gracias.

Su consejera, al oírla, se sintió estimulada en gran manera:

—Lo que usted sospecha implica la existencia de una intriga llevaba a cabo día tras día, en un ambiente de total confianza y simpatía, no sólo ante su vista sino también ante la vista de su padre. Y esto es algo que no puedo creer, ni siquiera por un instante.

—¡Naturalmente! Esto es exactamente lo que quería que me dijera.

En un susurro, la señora Assingham dijo:

—Pues ya se lo he dicho.

Maggie insistió:

—¿Nunca ha pensado que fuera posible? Muy alta la cabeza, Fanny contestó:

—Jamás, ni por un instante.

Maggie aceptó esa respuesta, pero quería más seguridades:

—Perdone que sea tan insoportable, pero ¿me lo asegura por lo más sagrado?

La señora Assingham miró a Maggie directamente a los ojos:

—Querida, le doy mi palabra de mujer honrada. La Princesa dijo:

—Gracias.

Quedaron las dos en silencio por un momento, luego Fanny preguntó:

—¿Y usted cree que es verdad?

—Yo la creo a usted.

—Bueno, pues como tengo fe en ellos, viene a ser lo mismo.

Ante esta conclusión, Maggie volvió a meditar, pero por fin aceptó la idea:

—Sí, lo mismo.

Fanny Assingham, en tono más alegre, le preguntó:

—En ese caso, ¿ya no se siente desdichada?

—Creo, sin duda, que no me sentiré desdichada durante mucho tiempo. Pero ahora fue la señora Assingham quien pidió más:

—¿La he convencido de que es imposible?

Al decir estas palabras, la señora Assingham había abierto los brazos a Maggie, quien, después de un momento de duda, se arrojó a ellos, emitiendo un sonido un tanto extraño para ser un suspiro de alivio. Enfáticamente, más que enfáticamente, Maggie repuso:

—Imposible, imposible.

Pero en el mismo instante rompía a llorar ante aquella imposibilidad, y pocos instantes después, mientras los dos se abrazaban, la imposibilidad era causa de que las lágrimas saltaran en llanto audible, comprensivo y perverso, de los ojos de la señora Assingham.

Capítulo XXXI

El acuerdo al que, al parecer, se llegó fue que el coronel y su esposa llegarían a medidos de julio para iniciar la «larga visita» a Fawns. Maggie consiguió que su padre insistiera cordialmente así como que la pareja de Eaton Square dieran allí la bienvenida, antes de que julio llegara a su mitad, y menos de una semana después de su llegada, a la pareja de Portland Place. «Así les daremos tiempo para respirar un poco», había observado Fanny haciendo referencia al proyecto con una alegría que entrañaba indiferencia a todo género de críticas y observando a cada uno de los miembros del grupo por separado; Fanny al poner de relieve con un énfasis que rozaba el amable cinismo, la confianza y franqueza con que su marido y ella se comportaban, levantaba sus ánimos y se protegía. Al parecer de Fanny, el papel que mejor podía interpretar era el de comportarse como si se sintiera fuertemente impresionada, como siempre se sentía en cuanto hacía relación con el asunto que nos ocupa, por la reconocida rudeza de su avidez y por la manera en que la hospitalidad de los Verver satisfacía sus necesidades y era fuente de comodidad para ella, habida cuenta de que el coronel siempre la había tenido privada de un rústico retiro, de un frondoso paraje, de una base fija en donde pasar la estación seca ya en puertas. En su hogar, Fanny había explicado y vuelto a explicar reiteradamente las características de su dilema, las dificultades que entrañaba el hallarse en la posición en que ella se hallaba o, como ahora decía, en que ellos dos se hallaban. En Cadogan Place, cuando los dos cónyuges no podían hacer otra cosa, hablaban de la maravillosa pequeña Maggie y del encanto, del siniestro encanto de tener que contener el aliento cuando la contemplaban: tema éste que la trascendental conversación de medianoche, en la que hemos estado presentes, no agotó ni mucho menos. El tema reaparecía irremediablemente en todos los momentos en que los cónyuges se quedaban solos. Entre los dos lo habían planteado, y el tema crecía y crecía, un día tras otro, de manera que el sentido de la responsabilidad del matrimonio casi quedó ahogado por el de la fascinación. En momentos como éstos, la señora Assingham declaraba que, con tal de beneficiar a aquel ser tan admirable y tan joven —por el que, como también declaró, había quedado totalmente conquistada—, estaba dispuesta a pasar, para el resto del mundo, incluso para el mismísimo Príncipe, objeto también absurdo, de su continua y explícitamente desvergonzada admiración, por ser una mujer vulgar, sin delicadeza y pestilente, que en el abandono propio de la vejez revelaba su verdadero carácter. Tal como hemos visto, toda situación garantizadamente embrollada merecía, gracias a la presión ejercida por la señora Assingham, la manifiesta atención del coronel; pero en el caso concreto que nos ocupa, este fenómeno, como la esposa del coronel le manifestaba saber perfectamente, no se debía a que el coronel se apiadara de ella o estuviera preocupado porque su esposa se hubiera dejado arrastrar hasta semejantes terrenos, sino a que tan pronto el coronel abría los ojos no podía evitar que su mirada se fijara complacida y casi inteligentemente en la Princesa. Sin embargo, si el coronel se había enamorado de la Princesa, tanto mejor para todos, ya que eso los ayudaría a no retroceder ante lo que tendrían que hacer en su defensa. La señora Assingham siempre sacaba a colación lo que acabamos de decir, cuando al coronel le daba por quejarse. En ningún momento de embeleso, a que el comportamiento real de Maggie daba lugar, la señora Assingham permitía que el coronel se olvidara de la necesidad en que los dos se verían:

—Como te he dicho una y otra vez, tendremos que mentir por ella; sí, tendremos que mentir hasta quedar con la cara congestionada.

—¿Mentir «por» ella?

El coronel en estas ocasiones, como si ante sí tuviera una confusa visión de la antigua caballerosidad revistiendo nuevas formas, se perdía a menudo en evidentes vacíos de lucidez.

—Tendremos que mentirle a ella, mentirle de arriba abajo, o por fuera y por dentro, que viene a ser lo mismo. Lo cual será exactamente lo mismo que mentir a los demás, mentir al Príncipe en lo tocante a la fe que se tiene en él, mentir a Charlotte en lo tocante a la fe que se tiene en ella, mentir al señor Verver, al buen señor Verver, en lo tocante a la fe que se tiene en todos. Sí, tenemos tela para rato, y la mayor mentira será fingir que nos gusta estar allí para semejante propósito. Nos repele de una forma indecible. Ante esta perspectiva me siento más inclinada a comportarme cobardemente y olvidarme del asunto, a dejar en actitud egoísta y pusilánime que todos se hundan, ante la perspectiva del cumplimiento de cualquiera de los deberes sociales y humanitarios que en mi vida me han obligado a comportarme decentemente.

Después de una pausa, Fanny Assingham añadió:

—En cuanto a ti, después de haberte dado yo una perfecta oportunidad para enamorarte de Maggie, sin duda alguna gozarás de la compensación de estar cerca de ella.

Ante palabras como éstas, el coronel siempre podía preguntar, con aire notablemente impertérrito:

—¿Y qué me dices de la compensación que para ti significa estar cerca del Príncipe, de quien estás manifiesta, cuando no exasperadamente enamorada, y de cuyo enamoramiento, del que prefiero no hablar por la bondadosa debilidad con que lo contemplo, pintas siempre un cuadro tan lindo?

En realidad, la señora Assingham siempre podía evocar contemplativamente el cuadro en cuestión. Dijo:

—¿No ves que me tropezaré con la dificultad de tener que destrozar el afecto en que el Príncipe me tiene, llevada por mi lealtad a Maggie?

—¿Eres incluso capaz de calificar de «lealtad a Maggie» una operación de encubrimiento del delito cometido por el Príncipe?

—Bueno, habría mucho que hablar del delito ése. Para nosotros es más interesante que cualquier otro delito. Sí, por lo menos tiene esa ventaja. Pero, desde luego, califico de lealtad a Maggie todo lo que proyecto hacer. Ser leal a Maggie es, principalmente, ayudarla ante su padre, que es lo que Maggie más desea y más necesita.

El coronel, en casos como el presente, ya había recibido abundantes lecciones, pero al parecer siempre necesitaba más:

—¿Ayudarla «ante» su padre?

—Ayudarla contra su padre. Contra eso acerca de lo cual ya hemos hablado tanto; contra el hecho de tener que reconocer, ellos dos, que él tiene dudas. Éste es el punto en que más claro es mi deber: ayudar a Maggie, ayudarla hasta el fin.

Una exaltación momentánea siempre iluminaba las referencias de la señora Assingham a dicha claridad, sin embargo, al mismo tiempo, rara vez dejaba de matizar su visión del asunto:

—Cuando digo que mi obligación es clara quiero decir que es absoluta; sí, porque la manera de hacerlo día tras día, contra viento y marea, puedes estar seguro que es harina de otro costal. Sin embargo, y afortunadamente, en cierto aspecto siempre seré fuerte. Puedo contar con ella.

El coronel, al llegar la conversación a este punto, como impulsado por un insidioso sentimiento de excitación, rara vez dejaba de preguntar, como si quisiera estimular a su esposa:

—¿Puedes contar con ella en el sentido de que no se dará cuenta de que mientes?

—En el sentido de serme fiel, sea lo que fuere aquello de lo que se dé cuenta. Si yo soy fiel a ella —es decir, si soy fiel a mi pobre y agresiva manera, teniendo siempre en cuenta el bienestar de todos—, ella me será fiel hasta la muerte. No me traicionará. Y conste que puede hacerlo fácilmente.

Ésa era, por lo general, la peligrosa curva en el camino que seguía la conversación entre los dos; pero, en cada viaje, Bob Assingham entraba en ella como si fuera la primera vez:

—¿«Fácilmente»?

—Puede hacer trizas mi honor ante su padre. Puede decirle que yo estaba al tanto, cuando su padre se casó —al igual que lo estaba cuando ella se casó—, de las relaciones que anteriormente habían existido entre su esposa y su marido.

—¿Y cómo puede hacer esto, si hasta el presente y según tus propias manifestaciones, Maggie no sabe que lo sabías?

Ésta era una pregunta cuya respuesta siempre soslayaba de tal manera que la reiterada práctica le había dado casi innegable grandeza, ya que reaccionaba como si con la pregunta la invitaran a decir que era éste

exactamente el asunto en que se proponía mentir mejor. Pero, con gran lucidez, dijo otra cosa totalmente diferente, que incluso parecía constituir un triunfo sobre la rudeza de los hombres.

Y la pobre señora añadió:

—Les basta con ponerse de acuerdo; en cuanto a mí respecta, les basta con sentir unánimemente, sentir con amargura, que han sido objeto de una maquinación, que han sido engañados, que han sufrido perjuicios; les basta con acusarme a mí, cada uno ante el otro, del delito de ser falsaria e infame, para que quede irremediablemente perdida. Desde luego, la engañada he sido yo, y sigo siéndolo; además, engañada por el Príncipe y por Charlotte, pero éstos no están obligados a reconocerlo con respecto a mí, ni están obligados a reconocer nada con respecto a nadie. Estarán en su pleno derecho si nos califican a todos juntos de pandilla de conspiradores crueles y falsarios; si saben encontrar los hechos pertinentes en que apoyarse, pueden desembarazarse de nosotros de una vez para siempre.

Estas palabras siempre tenían la virtud de expresar la situación con tan siniestros matices que el solo hecho de repetirlas bastaba para inducirla a contemplar con ardiente mirada las distintas partes de la historia, de manera que veía al mismo tiempo su fea coherencia y su brillo pasajero. La señora Assingham siempre experimentaba placer al hacer presente a su marido el peligro en que se hallaba al conseguir que adquiriese aspecto de realidad, y al ver que su marido casi palidecía cuando sus miradas se encontraban ante la posibilidad de quedar en tan comprometida situación y tan desprestigiados los dos. Lo más bonito era que, en armonía con una de las marfileñas notas de la parte izquierda del teclado, el coronel se expresaba con breve sequedad de hombre bueno, estúpido e intranquilo:

—En lo que a ti respecta, ¿con qué fin se puede decir que conspiraste?

—Pues con el evidente fin de proporcionar al Príncipe una esposa a costa de Maggie. Después, con el de proporcionar a Charlotte un marido a costa del señor Verver.

—Comprendo; es decir, con el fin de prestar amistosos servicios que, según parece, han dado lugar a complicaciones. Pero, como tú no tuviste la intención de crear todas estas complicaciones, ¿a santo de qué no ibas a prestar estos servicios?

A la señora Assingham le parecía extraordinario que su marido, si se le daba tiempo, siempre hablaba en defensa de ella mejor de lo que ella misma podía hacerlo cuando se hallaba en una situación como ésta contemplada en sus más sombríos tonos. Sin embargo, la señora Assingham, a pesar de estar preocupada, nunca dejaba de exprimir más jugo a la conversación para divertirse más.

—¿Acaso la finalidad por la que me entrometí, en el caso de que pueda demostrarse que me porté como una entrometida, no puede ser objeto de comentario por parte del señor Verver y de Maggie? ¿Acaso, a la luz de su interpretación, no pueden estimar que actué impelida por el deseo de favorecer a los otros dos más que al padre y a la hija, que a fin de cuentas se considerarían víctimas?

Decididamente, a la señora Assingham le gustaba dar vueltas y más vueltas a aquel asunto. Siguió:

—Pueden estimar también que actué, ante todo, con el deseo de rendir un servicio al Príncipe, un servicio a cualquier precio, consistente en «colocarle» bien colocado; en otras palabras, en poner a su alcance el dinero que necesitaba. ¿Acaso el asunto no puede parecer un equívoco y siniestro trato entre nosotros, algo absolutamente sórdido y *louche*?

Infaliblemente, estas palabras fueron causa de que el pobre coronel repitiera, con un eco:

—«*Louche*», querida…

—¿Acaso no lo has dicho tú mismo? ¿Acaso no has sido tú quien ha señalado esta posibilidad?

En estos momentos, solía hacer referencia a los aciertos de su marido de manera que a éste le gustara recordarlos. El coronel dijo:

—¿Cuándo he hablado de que siempre estuviste encaprichada de…?

—Encaprichada precisamente del hombre a quien iba a ayudar a situarse tan cómodamente. Fue un capricho maternal, como probablemente consideraría cualquier mirada sin prejuicios; aunque, desde luego, no estamos tratando de miradas sin prejuicios. Estamos hablando de gente buena e inocente profundamente preocupada por un horrendo descubrimiento, que llega mucho más lejos, en su calificación, de lo nefasto, como casi siempre hace esta clase de gente, no aquella que ha estado bien despierta desde un principio. Y lo que yo iba a obtener de ese amigo mío, en la opinión de dicha gente, a cambio de lo que yo hubiera podido ser capaz de hacer, hubiese sido una clase de valor, que mejor que nadie yo hubiese astutamente sopesado.

Y la señora Assingham siempre se extraviaba con gran facilidad en su ansioso deseo de llenar el lienzo en que pintaba su cuadro.

—Se hubiera visto, se hubiera oído hablar de ello, como el caso de la mujer a quien un hombre no

quiere, o de la mujer de quien un hombre está cansado, o de la mujer que carece de utilidad para un hombre, salvo esta utilidad; una mujer que es capaz en su enamoramiento, en su pasión, de favorecer los intereses de dicho hombre ante otras mujeres con el fin de no perderle de vista, de no perder el contacto con él, de no romper todo trato con él. *Cela s'est vu*, querido, y cosas más raras aún como no tengo necesidad de decírtelo a ti, precisamente.

Y concluyó:

—Ya ves, pues, que ésta es una concepción muy posible de la manera de comportarse de tu dulce esposa, como antes he dicho, pues no hay imaginación más viva, tan pronto se despierta, que la de los corderos realmente agitados. Los leones no son nada comparados con ellos: los leones son refinados, son *blasés*, y se han acostumbrado desde un principio a la caza y el merodeo. Reconocerás que tenemos no poco en qué pensar. Sin embargo, y por fortuna, cuento con el alivio de lo que pienso.

A estas alturas, el coronel tenía clara conciencia de lo que su esposa, a fin de cuentas, pensaba; pero, por otra parte, al coronel tampoco le faltaban ganas de divertirse. Para un espectador de estas conversaciones entre los cónyuges, el coronel bien hubiera podido parecerse, y no poco, al niño sin malicia que escucha su cuento favorito por vigésima vez, y goza de él precisamente porque sabe lo que ocurrirá a continuación. El coronel añadió:

—Lo que desde luego les intrigará, si es que tienen menos imaginación que la que tú les atribuyes, es determinar qué beneficio sacaste de favorecer el matrimonio de la señora Verver. No estabas ni tanto así enamorada de ella.

La señora Assingham, en este punto, siempre decía:

—Bueno, mi intervención en este asunto siempre queda justificada por mis deseos de serle agradable a él.

—¿Al señor Verver?

—Al Príncipe. Sí, para evitar, como el Príncipe estaba en peligro de llegar a ver, que Charlotte se casara con un hombre con el que el Príncipe no pudiera establecer y mantener una relación tan íntima como la que tiene con su suegro. Puse a Charlotte en las inmediaciones del Príncipe, la puse a su alcance como jamás hubiera podido estar si hubiera seguido soltera o si se hubiera casado con un hombre diferente.

—¿La pusiste en tan dulce situación para que fuera la amante del Príncipe?

—La puse en tan dulce situación para que fuera la amante del Príncipe.

Había hablado con grandeza. Estas palabras siempre le producían efecto de grandeza a la señora Assingham y también, de manera harto visible, a su marido. La señora Assingham añadió:

—En este caso, teniendo en cuenta sus especiales circunstancias, las facilidades eran ideales.

—Contando incluso la facilidad de que todo te importaba tan poco, desde tu personal punto de vista, le proporcionaste al Príncipe la ocasión de gozar de dos bellas mujeres.

—Contando incluso ésta, esta monstruosidad de mi locura. Pero no, no fueron «dos» hermosas mujeres. Fue una hermosa mujer y una hermosa fortuna. Esto es a lo que un ser puramente virtuoso se expone cuando permite que su virtud, cuando permite que su comprensión, cuando permite que su desinterés, cuando permite que su exquisito sentido del vivir del prójimo, le lleven demasiado lejos. *Voilà*.

—Comprendo. Y ésta es la razón por la que los Verver te tienen atrapada. —Es la razón por la que los Verver me tienen atrapada. O dicho en otras palabras, ésta es la razón por la que podrían hacer grandes alardes entre sí de tenerme atrapada si Maggie no fuera absolutamente divina.

—¿Maggie te deja en libertad?

El coronel nunca dejaba de insistir, hasta el final, en todos los detalles, por lo que estaba siempre tan versado en lo tocante a lo que su esposa pensaba, a fin de cuentas. La señora Assingham dijo:

—Maggie me deja en libertad. Por eso, ahora, horrorizada y contrita ante lo que hice, puedo ayudarla a salir del atolladero. Y el señor Verver también me deja en libertad.

—En ese caso, ¿crees que está al tanto de lo que ocurre?

Esta pregunta del coronel siempre la inducía a hacer una pausa rebosante de significado, a sumergirse profundamente en sus pensamientos, y a decir:

—Creo que el señor Verver me dejaría en libertad si estuviera al tanto de lo ocurrido, a fin de que yo pudiera ayudarle a salir del atolladero. 0, mejor dicho, a fin de que pudiera ayudar a Maggie. Esto sería su motivo, ésta sería su condición para perdonarme, de la misma forma que para ella, en realidad, el motivo y condiciones consisten en que actúe con el fin de evitar sufrimientos a su padre. Sin embargo, quien me preocupa de forma directa es Maggie. Y te aseguro que, pase lo que pase, el señor Verver jamás me dirá ni

media palabra, jamás me dirigirá siquiera una mirada. En consecuencia, de ello se deduce que probablemente y por pelos me libraré del castigo anejo a mis delitos.

—Querrás decir que te librarás de que se te considere responsable.

—Me libraré de que se me considere responsable. Mi ventaja consistirá en que Maggie es una carta invencible en esta baraja.

—Una carta que, como tú dices, te será fiel.

—Me será fiel a mí, será fiel a nuestro acuerdo; sí, ya que nuestro acuerdo está firmado y sellado.

Pensar de nuevo en lo mismo equivalía siempre para la señora Assingham a exaltarse de nuevo:

—Es un pacto noble, un pacto excelso. Lo ha jurado solemnemente.

—Pero ¿lo ha expresado con palabras?

—¡Y tanto que sí! Con palabras, puesto que se trata de un asunto de palabras. Ella mantendrá su mentira mientras yo mantenga la mía.

—¿Ya qué llamas «su» mentira?

—A la ficción de que cree en mí, que cree que los otros dos son inocentes.

—¿Realmente cree que son culpables? ¿Ha llegado a estar convencida de esto, sin tener pruebas?

Éste era siempre el momento en que Fanny Assingham vacilaba más; pero también conseguía siempre aclarar suficientemente el asunto de acuerdo con su manera de pensar y acompañando sus palabras con un profundo suspiro:

—No se trata de una cuestión de creencia o de pruebas, ausentes o presentes; para ella se trata, con carácter inevitable, de una cuestión de percepción natural o de sensación invencible. Sabe de una manera irresistible que hay algo entre los dos. Pero no ha «llegado», como tú dices, a esa conclusión. Esto es exactamente lo que Maggie no ha hecho, lo que, perseverante e intensamente, se niega a hacer. Se contiene y se contiene para no llegar. Se mantiene en alta mar lejos de la costa rocosa, y lo que más desea es que yo me mantenga, juntamente con ella, a distancia segura, en tanto que yo, en defensa de mi propia piel, no pido otra cosa que mantenerme alejada.

Después de estas palabras Fanny Assingham aclaraba el asunto, de una vez para siempre, al coronel:

—Lejos de desear pruebas, pruebas que sólo puede obtener haciendo causa común conmigo, lo que Maggie desea es contrapruebas contra sí misma, a cuyo efecto ha recurrido a mí para formularme la extraordinaria petición de ponerme en contra de ella. A poco que se piense, es realmente magnífico el espíritu que anima su petición. Basta con que yo encubra con la audacia suficiente a los otros, revoloteando a su alrededor y por encima de ellos, feliz como un pajarito, para que ella, por su parte, haga lo que pueda. En pocas palabras, si consigo que ellos estén tranquilos, conseguiré que Maggie pueda ganar tiempo para que su padre no comience a pensar y de esta manera podrá superar la situación. Si yo me encargo concretamente de Charlotte, ella se encargará del Príncipe. Es hermoso y maravilloso, es realmente patético y exquisito, advertir lo mucho que estima que el tiempo pueda beneficiarla.

—¿Ya qué le llama «tiempo», la pobrecilla?

—Bueno, pues a este verano en Fawns, para empezar. De momento, Maggie puede vivir al día, pero ha llegado a comprender, por sí misma y sin ayuda de nadie, creo yo, que el peligro que Fawns entraña en sí mismo, superficialmente considerado, puede prácticamente representar una mayor protección. Allí, los amantes, caso que sean amantes, tendrán que andar con tiento. Y se darán cuenta, a no ser que hayan llegado ya demasiado lejos.

—¿Y no han llegado demasiado lejos?

De manera inevitable, la pobre mujer tenía sus dudas ante esta pregunta, pero daba su respuesta del mismo modo que, para efectuar la compra de un artículo indispensable, dejaría su último chelín sobre el mostrador:

—No.

Esta contestación siempre hacía sonreír a su marido, quien le preguntaba:

—¿Es eso una mentira?

—¿Imaginas que vale la pena mentirte a ti?

Luego, Fanny Assingham añadía:

—Si para mí no fuera la verdad, no hubiese aceptado ir a Fawns. Puedo, creo, conseguir que los desdichados estén tranquilos.

—¿Y en el peor de los casos?

—¡No me hables del «peor de los casos»! En el mejor de los casos, puedo mantenerlos tranquilos, pura y

simplemente por el mero hecho de que tú y yo estemos allí, y esto es lo que pienso. Al paso de las semanas, lo conseguiremos. Ya lo verás.

El coronel estaba plenamente dispuesto a verlo; pero, naturalmente, necesitaba precaverse:

—¿Y si no lo conseguimos?

—¡Otra vez hablas del peor de los casos!

Bueno, quizá fuera así, pero ¿qué hacían los dos cónyuges el día entero, durante aquella crisis, sino hablar?

—Y los otros ¿qué?

—¿Los otros?

—¿Quién los mantendrá tranquilos? Si tu pareja ha tenido cierta vida en común, difícilmente habrá podido tenerla con total ausencia de testigos, sin que ciertas personas, por pocas que sean, sepan algo, tengan alguna idea de lo ocurrido. Los dos habrán tenido que reunirse en secreto, habrán utilizado protecciones, habrán tenido que organizarse y, si no se han reunido, si no se han organizado y si no se han puesto en evidencia en un lugar u otro, ¿a santo de qué nos dedicamos a pensar tanto? En consecuencia, si hay pruebas en algún lugar de Londres…

—¿Forzosamente habrá personas que tengan esas pruebas?

Después de formular esta pregunta, Fanny Assingham recordaba:

—¡Ah, el mundo no se reduce a Londres!

Y meditativa, añadió:

—Algunas pruebas forzosamente han de relacionarlos; quiero decir que habrían de relacionarlos con otros lugares, con quién sabe qué extrañas aventuras, oportunidades y disimulos. Pero las pruebas que hubieran podido existir, con toda seguridad, fueron enterradas al instante. Saben cómo hacerlo y ¡muy bien que lo saben! De todas maneras, nada llegará a conocimiento de Maggie.

—¿Debido a qué, según crees, todos los que tienen algo que contar han sido sobornados de una manera u otra?

Y el coronel, de manera inveterada, antes de que su mujer pudiera contestar, gozaba extraordinariamente en formular la siguiente pregunta:

—¿Y qué habrá podido sobornar a lady Castledean?

Fanny Assingham contestó con presteza:

—La conciencia de que no puede arrojar piedras contra tejado ajeno. Bastante trabajo tiene con proteger su propio tejado. Precisamente, esto fue lo que hizo la última mañana en Matcham cuando todos nos fuimos: pidió al Príncipe y a Charlotte que se quedaran. Lady Castledean los ayudó con el único fin de que ellos la ayudaran a ella, a no ser que hubiera sido el Príncipe quien hubiese llegado a un acuerdo al respecto, con el ridículo señor Blint. En consecuencia, los dos pasaron el día juntos, quedaron con el día justificado y a su disposición, y bajo la mirada de lady Castledean, por lo menos hasta el momento en que volvimos a poder seguirles la pista, que fue por la noche.

Al recordar este histórico hecho, la señora Assingham volvió a sentirse propensa a la meditación, y acabó añadiendo virtuosamente:

—Y esto es todo lo que sabemos, a Dios gracias.

La gratitud del coronel no era tan ferviente:

—¿Y qué hicieron esos dos desde el momento en que quedaron libres hasta que, según me has dicho, fue cuando avanzada la noche regresaron a sus respectivos hogares?

—¡Esto es asunto que no te concierne!

—No he dicho que sea asunto que me concierna; además, estoy convencido de que se trata de un asunto suyo y muy suyo, por cierto. Sin embargo, en Inglaterra siempre es posible seguir la pista de la gente cuando es necesario seguir pistas. Tarde o temprano siempre ocurre algo; tarde o temprano siempre hay alguien que rompe el sagrado silencio. Los asesinatos salen a la superficie.

—Los asesinatos, sí. Pero esto no es un asesinato. ¡Quizá sea todo lo contrario!

Después de unos instantes de silencio, Fanny Assingham añadió:

—Aunque estoy convencida de que lo que realmente te divertiría seria el asesinato.

El coronel no dio muestras de haber oído esta observación; después de una larga y meditativa chupada de pipa, trató otro tema cuya incongruencia jamás había bastado para quitarle el vicio de abordarlo:

—Lo que no alcanzo a comprender, por mucho que lo intente, es la idea que te has formado del viejales.

—¿Del inconcebiblemente extraño marido de Charlotte? No me he formado idea alguna.

—Perdón, perdón, querida; pero acabas de demostrar lo contrario. Jamas hablas de él sin calificarle de inconcebiblemente extraño.

Fanny Assingham confesaba:

—Es que lo es. Lo cual significa, en la medida que sé, que es inconcebiblemente grande. Pero esto no es una idea. Esto sólo expresa la necesidad que tengo, por debilidad, de sentir que el marido de Charlotte está fuera de mi alcance, lo cual tampoco es una idea. Y, como muy bien sabes, es capaz de comportarse como un estúpido.

—Precisamente a eso iba.

La señora Assingham prosiguió del siguiente modo:

—Por otra parte, también es capaz de comportarse de manera sublime, más sublime todavía que su propia hija. Quizá ya se haya portado de manera sublime. Aunque nunca lo sabremos.

Y el tono con que la señora Assingham pronunciaba estas palabras quizá tuviera cierto matiz de contemplar con amargura la única excepción a la que ella no daba una bienvenida entusiasta. Comentó:

—De esto no me cabe la menor duda.

Estás palabras produjeron en el coronel cierta sensación de privación:

—Ya, ya…

—E incluso dudo que llegue a saberlo el Príncipe.

En resumen, parecía que todos padecían aquella privación. Prosiguió:

—Vivirán engañados, confusos, atormentados, pero no lo sabrán. Aunque se junten para llegar a averiguarlo, no lo conseguirán.

Y Fanny Assingham decretó:

—Éste será su castigo.

Llegados a tan avanzado punto, la señora Assingham terminaba con el mismo latiguillo:

—Y también probablemente será el mío si salgo librada con tan poco. A su marido le gustaba preguntar:

—¿Y cuál será el mío?

—Ninguno. No eres digno de castigo alguno. El castigo de uno consiste en lo que uno siente; lo que dé eficacia a nuestro castigo será lo que sintamos.

Resplandecía al emplear aquel «nuestro», y el resplandor se transformaba en llamas cuando emitía la siguiente profecía:

—Maggie será quien lo inflija.

—¿Maggie?

—Ella sabrá todo con respecto a su padre. Hecha una pausa, repitió:

—Todo.

La señora Assingham, ante esta visión, como llevada por el presentimiento de una extraña desesperación, abandonó el tema con las siguientes palabras:

—Pero nunca nos lo dirá.

Capítulo XXXII

Si Maggie no hubiera decidido decir jamás con tanta firmeza a su buena amiga o a cualquier otra persona más de lo que se proponía acerca de su padre, quizá no hubiera incurrido en semejante exceso durante la semana que pasó en Londres en compañía de su marido, después de que los otros se hubieran trasladado a Fawns para pasar allí el verano. Todo se debió al raro matiz de extrañeza impuesto al simple hecho de su breve separación por las obligaciones anejas al curso de su vivir. Es cierto que Maggie, en esta sazón, estaba ya acostumbrada a enfrentarse con elementos extraños, pero perdía instantáneamente incluso aquella paz que había conseguido formarse con dificultades cuando quedaba dominada por la sensación de que su impenetrable padre quizá estuviera a solas con ellos. Maggie consideraba que su padre estaba a solas con ellos cuando pensaba que estaba a solas con Charlotte, y era así, por raro que parezca, incluso aunque Maggie se fijaba en la capacidad que la esposa de su padre tenía para mantener, e incluso mejorar, unas apariencias de suma felicidad. Charlotte lo había conseguido, aunque ante dificultades inconmensurablemente menores, durante los meses de su nupcial ausencia de Inglaterra, período que precedió a la maravillosa reunión de las dos parejas, en beneficio del mayor ejercicio de todas las virtudes de cada cual, lo que ahora daba frutos tan dignos de atención, al menos para la hijastra de la señora Verver. Era el presente y breve paréntesis, en una situación o posiblemente en una relación tan alterada, y el nuevo planteamiento de su problema lo que pondría a prueba el arte de Charlotte. La Princesa podía consolarse reiteradamente al recordar que la relación «real» entre su padre y su esposa era algo de lo que no sabía nada en absoluto y que, en sentido estricto, no se trataba de un asunto de su incumbencia; pero, a pesar de ello, no conseguía conservar su tranquilidad —como ella decía—, ante la proyectada imagen del aparentemente feliz aislamiento de aquella pareja. No había nada que hubiera podido participar menos en la naturaleza de paz y tranquilidad, como cierto extraño deseo que de vez en cuando se alzaba repentinamente ante ella; un deseo que usurpaba perversamente el lugar de otro mucho más natural. ¡Ojalá Charlotte, en su actuación, hubiera sido peor! Ésta era la idea que Maggie invocaba, en lugar de que Charlotte fuera mejor, lo cual resultaba más deseable. Y así era, aun cuando fuera extremadamente raro experimentar deseos de ese jaez, porque Maggie creía que quizá no se preocuparía tanto si no tuviera la certeza de que su madrastra, bajo las copas de los hermosos árboles y entre los tan queridos jardines antiguos, prodigaba cincuenta clases de confianza y por lo menos veinte de amabilidad. La amabilidad y la confianza formaban parte del correcto trato que una mujer encantadora debe dar a su esposo, pero el sutil tejido de seguridad, tramado por las manos de aquella señora y arrojado por ella sobre su marido a modo de leve y envolvente velo, formaba precisamente una transparencia a través de la cual Maggie sentía constantemente la mirada de su padre fija en ella. La mirada de su padre le llegaba todavía más derecha desde lejos, y esta mirada le revelaba a su padre en un estado todavía más consciente, a lo lejos, solo, con la sospechada y percibida elaboración del proceso encaminado a no alarmarle, a no dañarle. Durante semanas y semanas, y sin pestañear, Maggie había medido la extensión de tan piadoso esfuerzo; pero el éxito completo conseguido por ella en lo tocante a no revelar ni un solo indicio —sí, Maggie se reconocía este mérito— sería un logro inútil si la señora Verver cometía ante su marido los mismos errores que había cometido ante la hija de su marido; tantos errores y empleados de modo tan excesivamente brusco y tan excesivamente incoherente, que no podían corregir otro conjunto de errores. De todas maneras, si la

actuación de la pobre mujer hubiera sido peor, ¿quién hubiera podido afirmar con certeza que su marido hubiese estado mejor?

Una se movía a tientas y en silencio por entre estos interrogantes; la Princesa ni siquiera sabía con certeza si su Americo, ahora solo con ella en la ciudad, había adoptado el medio áureo de la galantería sin precauciones que según los cálculos del propio Príncipe acabaría por desalojar las críticas íntimas de la última rama en que hubieran podido posarse. Respecto a lo anterior, la verdad era que Maggie padecía terrores de diferentes clases; momentos había en que estimaba que aquellos días no eran más que una prolongada repetición del viaje nocturno, efectuado semanas atrás, desde la otra casa a la propia. Durante ese viaje el Príncipe había intentado someterla a su encanto mediante su soberano poderío personal, para que se derrumbara de tal manera que la llevara a repudiar el comportamiento consecuente. Debemos decir que Maggie jamás estaba a solas con el Príncipe sin verse obligada a preguntarse, tarde o temprano, si su consecuencia no había desaparecido ya; pero, al mismo tiempo, siempre y cuando Maggie ni siquiera insinuara una acusación, conservaba un resto de apariencias que la defendían de un ataque. Un ataque, lo que se dice un verdadero ataque, efectuado por el Príncipe tal como lo llevaría a efecto, era lo que Maggie más temía; sobre todo, porque no estaba segura, si se daba el caso, de que no se precipitaría en una sima de debilidad que revelara al Príncipe un camino más corto para dominarla, camino que podría volver a seguir. En consecuencia, como sea que Maggie no había dado al Príncipe todavía, ni siquiera por un instante, el pretexto de fingir que había perdido la fe o que su felicidad había quedado menoscabada, le concedió, en buena lógica, una inmensa ventaja en lo referente a las esperas y a las tensiones de todo género. Por el momento, Maggie deseaba que el Príncipe no tuviera que «compensarla» de nada. ¿Quién podía decir a lo que una «compensación» podía conducir?, ¿en qué ceguera de consentimiento, de ficción o de destrucción podía sumirla? Maggie todavía amaba al Príncipe de tan irremediable manera que no osaba abrir la puerta, ni entornarla siquiera, a la posibilidad de que la tratara como si cualquiera de los dos hubiera dado un trato indebido al otro. Algo o alguien —¿y quién de ellos?, ¿quién entre todos ellos?— tendría que ser inevitablemente sacrificado al impulso del momentáneo soplo del egoísmo. Sin embargo, lo que Maggie necesitaba era saber adónde iba. Este conocimiento constituía, al mismo tiempo una fascinación y un temor; precisamente, parte de la rareza de la encrucijada en que se hallaba radicaba en el temor que Maggie tenía de que el Príncipe le hiciera una confesión de carácter meramente general que se mezclaba con la absoluta necesidad que tenía de perdonarle, de darle seguridades, de corresponder a sus deseos en unos aspectos de los que tenía cabal medida. Para hacer esto era preciso saber con toda claridad con qué fin lo hacía, pero actuar conociendo los fines que perseguía representaba llegar al horror de saber lo que realmente habían sido los otros actos. El Príncipe bien podía decirle tan sólo lo que él quisiera, sólo aquello que la impresionara por el atractivo del Príncipe y por el resultado de la directa atracción de cualquier gracia esgrimida por él sería la inevitable sumisión de Maggie a sus condiciones. En consecuencia, toda su temporal seguridad, todo su éxito día a día, radicaba en conseguir que el Príncipe no se diera cuenta de lo anterior; que no lo adivinara siquiera, dependiendo de los medios que Maggie pusiera a contribución para evitarlo; los medios que pusiera a contribución literalmente hora tras hora durante aquellos días de no tan interrumpido trato. De un momento a otro, Maggie temía que su esposo diera muestras de haber decidido dar un salto en el vacío. «Sí, realmente ha ocurrido lo que piensas: me he apartado del recto camino, me consideré libre, me he entregado a otra medida, con más amplia generosidad, porque pensé que eras diferente, diferente a lo que ahora veo que eres. Pero todo se ha debido únicamente a no saber; y, por otra parte, debes reconocer que no me has dado razones suficientes; razones suficientes, quiero decir, para evitar mi error; un error, lo confieso, por el que gustosamente hago penitencia, y error que tú puedes ayudarme de manera maravillosa a superar.»

Esto era lo que, mientras se examinaba a sí misma, creía que el Príncipe podía llegar a decir; mientras llegaba a su término otro día, otra secuencia, en otro momento, hallándose los dos juntos, sin que el Príncipe lo dijera, Maggie se sentía absorbida por él incluso hasta un punto situado más allá de la entrega total. Maggie conservaba la serenidad por una razón, por una causa, y el esfuerzo de conseguir esta distanciada situación juntamente con el esfuerzo de quitarle importancia los encerraba a los dos dentro del aro de acero de una intimidad comparada con la cual la pasión ingenua no era más que el soplo de una leve brisa. El mayor peligro para Maggie, o por lo menos su más importante motivo de preocupación, radicaba en el obsesivo pensamiento según el cual, si su esposo llegaba realmente a sospechar, el resultado de la atención que prestara a ella no podría dejar de ser un aumento de la importancia que se le atribuía. Al tomar la medida del obligado alcance de su propia hipocresía con el Príncipe, como antes la había tomado

con su padre, Maggie se daba cuenta de que su hipocresía tenía que llegar incluso al intento de demostrar que, a pesar de todo, ella no era importante. Un solo toque del Príncipe —si llegara, ¡qué claramente Maggie lo vería llegar!—, el simple roce de su mano, el roce de sus labios, el roce de su aliento, inspirado por el descubrimiento de lo que a Maggie interesaba y no por la piedad suscitada por su virtual melancolía, bastaría para que quedara atada de pies y manos a disposición del Príncipe. En consecuencia, para ser libre, para ser libre y actuar de una manera que no fuera abyecta en beneficio de su padre, debía ocultar al Príncipe la eficacia, como la de un minúsculo insecto empujando un grano de arena, que por sí misma había conseguido tener. Maggie podía disimular tal eficacia gracias a las apariencias de su comportamiento, pero no podía disimular indefinidamente; en realidad, uno de los extraordinarios resultados de aquella semana que pasaron en constante compañía erizada de nuevos síntomas, fue el que Maggie invocara en su mente a sus habituales compañeros, y calculara cuál sería la clase de alivio que comportaría reunirse con ellos. Casi minuto a minuto, estaba aprendiendo a ser maestra en los detalles; cuando se daba la suficiente intimidad, conseguía notables efectos aunque es preciso tener en cuenta que actuaba ante un adversario que era maestro en matices, el cual descubriría la naturaleza de la lucha que libraban si Maggie no tomaba las debidas precauciones. En realidad, apercibir al Príncipe, o la posibilidad de advertir que él se apercibía a sí mismo, en calidad de adversario, en un asunto de tal sutileza —dicho en pocas palabras, verle en el acto de rechazar una calificación que le colocase en situación de oposición— significaba que Maggie quedara reducida a ahogar visiblemente su grito de alarma. Si el Príncipe intuía que los dos estaban librando a su oculta manera una importante lucha y que era Maggie quien constantemente y en su supuesta estupidez daba importancia a la lucha y mantenía su importancia; si realmente ocurría esto antes de abandonar Londres, Maggie perdería rotundamente la batalla.

La posible tregua que Fawns quizá representara para ella tenía su origen en que la observación del Príncipe quedaría allí, en parte, inevitablemente desviada. Y así sería, incluso en el caso de que sólo se tuviera en cuenta que la notable influencia de la placidez del padre de Maggie probablemente reclamaría gran parte de la atención del Príncipe. Además, allí estaba Charlotte siempre dispuesta a distraerle. De todas maneras, y sin la menor duda, Charlotte le ayudaría a analizar, del derecho y del revés, cuanto resultara sintomático, pero Maggie advertía que este hecho quizá pudiera contribuir, en cierta medida, a proteger su secreto. Se concibe, incluso, que la Princesa se apercibiera del resplandor de una comodidad que iría en aumento con los naturales efectos que en el espíritu del Príncipe, en sus nervios, en su más íntima capacidad de irritarse, tendrían algunas de las facetas y habilidades, las más livianas gracias, de la perfecta competencia de la señora Verver. A fin de cuentas, se decía Maggie a sí misma, lo que tenga mayor importancia será la renovación del privilegio del Príncipe de observar cómo aquella señora la observaba a ella. Sin embargo, teniendo en consideración la mezcolanza de elementos y factores que se daban en el Príncipe, ¿hasta cuándo sería capaz de contenerse gozando en calidad de simple espectador del hecho mencionado? Maggie ya había sacado la conclusión de que él, cuando se hallaba en presencia de Charlotte, se plegaba al arte sutil de la señora Verver en lo tocante a montar guardia. ¿No se cansaría, dicho sea sin cargar las tintas, de ver a Charlotte siempre ojo avizor, erguida y elegante, con su sombrilla de ribete de encaje, plegada o al hombro, ir de un lado para otro, en dirección al rosado Este o al Oeste? Maggie había llegado verdaderamente muy lejos en la contemplación de esta concreta reacción; no cabe decir que fuera incapaz de serenarse mediante el reproche de estar anticipando unos hechos que quizá no ocurrieran. Maggie tenía que estar segura de muchas cosas, antes de atribuir una expresión de cansancio a Americo y unas lógicas razones de tal cansancio.

Uno de los disimulados recursos que Maggie empleaba para hacer frente a la tensión imperante consistía en mezclar a la señora Assingham, de la manera más natural posible, con las ondulaciones del vivir aparente de los dos; hacer lo preciso para que dicha señora les acompañara por la tarde cuando los dos salían en coche, o cuando iban a ver cosas y objetos, ya que ver cosas y objetos se había convertido en algo tan característico de su vivir que parecía que fueran miembros de una familia dedicados a inaugurar tómbolas benéficas. En las últimas horas del día cabía hacer otras combinaciones, como, por ejemplo, recabar la presencia de la señora Assingham o la del coronel para ir a la ópera, cantara quien cantase, o sentir repentinos ataques de curiosidad por el arte dramático británico. Los buenos amigos de Cadogan Place siempre accedían sin protesta alguna a cenar con ellos e ir después a cuantos lugares públicos la Princesa tenía la audacia de preferir. Debemos decir que Maggie, en estas ocasiones, gozaba de sus sensaciones como si las hallara a su paso, nerviosa y distanciadamente; como si fueran florecillas silvestres de su oscuro bosque, por lo que podía sonreír ante ellas con la desahogada apariencia ante sus amigos y

sobre todo ante su marido de quien va frívola y animosamente de excursión. Maggie experimentaba también intensos y sofocados momentos de excitación, que casi eran como inspiraciones; de manera principal tenía la extraña sensación, y a veces verdaderamente divertida, de utilizar a su amiga al máximo, con el correspondiente lujo de no tener que darle explicaciones. No, nunca, nunca más tendría Maggie que volver a dar explicaciones a Fanny Assingham; la pobre mujer, por su parte, tenía que llevar la carga, y quizá tuviera que llevarla hasta el fin de sus días, del privilegio de su penetrante ingenio. Maggie confiaba plenamente en ella, y la buena señora apreciaba en todo su valor esta confianza. Ahora, cada día más magnífica en su intachable egoísmo, Maggie no le preguntaba nada, con lo que le daba a entender la grandeza de la oportunidad que le deparaba. A ella no le importaban nada las aficiones de los Assingham, no quería saber nada de las cenas a que estaban ya comprometidos, pues esto sólo eran «detalles», y Maggie podía pensar sin pestañear siquiera en todas las modificaciones y en todas las rupturas a que el servicio a ella condenaba a los Assingham. Además, todo armonizaba a la perfección; en estos días, la Princesa, dura como un menudo y cortante diamante a pesar de su enfebrecido estado, daba muestras incluso del esplendor de poseer conscientemente capacidad creadora y constructiva. Le bastaba con ingeniárselas para presentarse ella y para presentar a su marido, con cierto aire de suficiencia para que pareciera natural que fueran a todas partes en compañía de su cortesano y de su cortesana. ¿Qué otra cosa, sino exactamente esto, había hecho Charlotte con ella durante tantas semanas de la temporada social anterior? Y Maggie había asumido la función y había desempeñado el oficio, en la mayor medida posible, de estas compañías subordinadas que flotan alrededor de los grandes.

De esta manera se sentó el precedente, y el grupo quedó normalmente constituido. Entre tanto, la señora Assingham, ya en la mesa, ya en la escalinata, ya en el palco de la ópera, podía mirar a Americo —con su característica insistencia, principalmente cuando de hombres se trataba—, de la manera que quisiera. Y no era esto precisamente lo que Maggie temía. Fanny Assingham podía advertir a Americo, podía formularle reproches, podía tranquilizarle, podía cortejarle amorosamente; en realidad resultaba imposible no hacerlo, ya que incluso se le permitía esto sencillamente en cuanto era asunto entre ellos si así contribuía al impecable comportamiento por ella garantizado. En realidad Maggie sólo quiso hacer comprender a Fanny que reconocía la eficacia de su ayuda cuando una noche le habló de un proyecto de poca monta que había forjado en su fuero interno, y que deseaba poner en práctica a la mañana del día siguiente: el proyecto se basaba en el intenso e irresistible propósito de visitar al señor Crichton en el Museo. Como la señora Assingham fácilmente recordaba, el señor Crichton era el funcionario público más competente y más amable que cupiera imaginar, a quien todos conocían y que a todos conocía, aquel que desde el principio, y principalmente al principio, se había prestado a ser gratuitamente y sólo por amor al arte y a la historia una de las más seguras fuentes de luz en el aventurado camino del señor Verver. Custodio de los más ricos departamentos de la gran colección nacional de objetos preciosos, sentía sincero aprecio por aquel coleccionista privado y le estimulaba a avanzar en su camino, incluso cuando se veía condenado a estar presente en el momento en que el coleccionista privado capturaba trofeos que la nación había sacrificado a la codicia parlamentaria. El señor Crichton extremaba su amabilidad hasta el punto de decir que, como Londres, dominado por gentes de escasa visión, forzosamente tenía que perder sus mejores y más insólitas oportunidades, «casi» le consolaba en gran manera ver cómo aquellas causas perdidas emprendían una tras otra, invariablemente, con el tintineante sonido de sus campanillas de plata, el camino hacia el fabuloso y ya renombrado acervo situado más allá del Mississippi. Los «casi» del señor Crichton tenían un encanto irresistible, principalmente después de que el señor Verver y su hija tuvieron la seguridad —o casi, otra vez — de gozar del monopolio de ellos; sobre esta base de envidia trocada en simpatía, gracias a un más íntimo conocimiento del padre y de la hija, el señor Crichton había aprendido en ambos hogares, aunque de modo principal en el de Eaton Square, a cumplir la función de personaje comprensivo y estimulante a un tiempo. Fue a invitación del señor Crichton, como Fanny muy bien recordaba, cuando Maggie, cierto día tiempo atrás, acompañada precisamente por la propia Fanny y para mayor gloria del apellido que ostentaba, había visitado uno de los más amplios altares de aquel supremo templo de exposición, estancia de estanterías repletas de viejos libros italianos encuadernados en oro y en marfil y oro, consagrados a la crónica del linaje del Príncipe. Fue una impresión penetrante e imborrable, a pesar de lo cual Maggie suspiró muy lindamente, lamentando que la inspección hubiera tenido que ser forzosamente tan superficial. Cualquier otro día Maggie volvería allá para sumergirse más profundamente, para quedarse largo rato para catar y catar. A pesar de estas palabras, sin embargo, la señora Assingham no podía recordar haber tenido indicios de que la visita se repitiera. Durante largo tiempo en su feliz vivir, Maggie había dado primacía a otras

ocasiones sobre aquella segunda ocasión y todas dieron testimonio, en su medida, de la excelencia de la sangre de su marido, de sus ricos componentes y de sus muchas y notables referencias; después, sin duda, el encantador fervor, en virtud de posteriores razones, se extravió por otros vericuetos y se debilitó.

Sin embargo, ahora parecía que una conversación con el señor Crichton había insuflado aliento vivificante en aquella debilitación; Maggie habló de su propósito, en concepto de idea exclusivamente suya, a cuyo éxito se proponía dedicar una mañana. Las visitas de graciosas damas, bajo la protección del señor Crichton, iluminaban con luz rosada, para aquel ser enamorado de las flores y libador de mieles de la gran colmena de Bloomsbury, sus atestados pasillos y sus celdas; a pesar de que el señor Crichton no sabía de cierto, a juzgar por el modo en que Maggie le formuló su petición, cuál sería el objeto que había vuelto a suscitar las ansias de su amiga, nada le fue más fácil que abrir a Maggie el camino de la urbanidad que presidía sus actos. Como Maggie dijo a la señora Assingham, quedó claramente establecido que ella renunciaría a la presencia de su marido. Más tarde Fanny recordaría que al principio había considerado que esta decisión constituía una de las más sutiles notas de distanciamiento de su joven amiga, e imaginó que debía ir allá sola por el matiz de ironía que en aquellos días de ambigüedades la presencia de su marido pudiera parecer conferir prácticamente a todos los atributos del transmitido significado de su persona. Luego, en el mismo instante, Fanny estimó con claridad que tan elaborada libertad era virtualmente la quintaesencia de la reflexión, el impulso para conmemorar de nuevo cuanto todavía quedaba de orgullo y de esperanza, con lo que la sensación de ambigüedad que Fanny experimentaba se desvaneció felizmente y felicitó a su amiga por tener algo tan exquisito que hacer y estar de tan buen humor para hacerlo. Llegado el momento, y después de que pasara, quedó confirmado el optimismo de Fanny, y por la noche supo que la hora pasada entre las luces con pantalla, las crónicas y las ilustraciones, los pergaminos y los retratos, los volúmenes con blasones y los comentarios en murmullos, había sido para la Princesa fuente de inspiración y de ampliación de conocimientos. Pocos días antes, Maggie había dicho a la señora Assingham, muy dulcemente pero al mismo tiempo con gran firmeza: «Invítenos a cenar, por favor, el próximo viernes; e invite también a quien quiera o a quien pueda, sea quien fuere». El matrimonio de Cadogan Place se había plegado a esta orden con docilidad sin indignación por lo que el mandato comportaba.

Maggie lo consideraba como una manera de ocupar una noche y, al parecer de su amiga, infundió carácter a la ocasión al calificarla, más o menos explícitamente, de nueva y extraña. Los buenos cónyuges Assingham gozaban de las otras dos mesas en una escala tan desproporcionada con respecto a las solicitudes de gozar de la suya, que resultaba fácil estimar divertido ver cómo daban de comer en casa, cómo se enfrentaban con el problema de ofrecer una cena. Resumiendo, digamos que Maggie cenó con ellos y llegó a conseguir que su marido lo aparentara de una manera muy parecida a la de una pareja de jóvenes soberanos, animados por el juguetón humor de los tiempos dorados de las monarquías, que se invitan a sí mismos en casa de una pareja de súbditos fieles. Maggie dio muestras de interés por el modo de vivir hogareño de los Assingham, y se comportó con una inquisitiva ternura que tuvo por objeto los aspectos económicos de la vida de los anfitriones; de este modo la dueña de la casa lo explicó todo de una manera que no dejaba de ser natural, como ella misma hubiera dicho: el tono general y la libertad de que Maggie daba ejemplo, atribuyéndolo a los renovados efectos, de una de las lecciones aprendidas por la mañana en el altar del pasado. ¿No sería que un par de anécdotas contadas a Maggie le habían recordado que para las princesas de su linaje había más de una manera de llegar a ser heroína? Aquella noche Maggie sorprendió a todos por su pródiga afabilidad. Sin duda alguna, no llegó a ser bulliciosa; pero, si bien la señora Assingham en calidad de crítico benévolo jamás había puesto en duda que los modales de Maggie eran gráciles, también es cierto que nunca la había visto poner a contribución tanto sus dotes para revestir las apariencias de lo que quizá pudiera llamarse su recia personalidad. Aquello era como una melodía a cuyo compás el corazón de Fanny podía latir en secreto. Su invitada era feliz, feliz a consecuencia de algo que había ocurrido, y hacía lo preciso para que el Príncipe no dejara de percibir ni siquiera una vibración de sus risas, aunque no siempre permitiéndole calificarlas de risas totalmente ajenas a la insensatez. La insensatez, en público, si rebasaba cierto punto, era algo que el Príncipe difícilmente toleraría que se atribuyera a su esposa; por tanto ante la amiga del Príncipe y de la Princesa se abrió la posibilidad de que se produjera después una escena entre ambos en el trayecto de regreso en el coche; una escena en casa basada en unas preguntas levemente sarcásticas, en la invitación a inmediatas explicaciones; una escena que, según fuera la interpretación que a su papel diera Maggie, podía o no podía precipitar acontecimientos. Por el momento, lo que daba a estas apariencias su carácter intrigante era el misterio —incluso para el propio Americo— sobre el incidente o la influencia que, de modo tan peculiar, había sido causa de ellas.

Sin embargo, la señora de Cadogan Place se enteraría de más cosas al cabo de tres días; estas cosas se le revelarían la víspera de la partida de Londres de su joven confidente. El esperado traslado a Fawns debía tener lugar en la mañana del día siguiente; de antemano sabía la señora Assingham que aquella noche el grupo formado por los cuatro cenaría en la Embajada norteamericana juntamente con un mayor contingente, por lo que no dejó de experimentar cierta sorpresa al recibir un telegrama, enviado por Maggie, que constaba expedido a las seis de la tarde, en el que le pedía fuera inmediatamente a su casa: «Por favor, venga ahora mismo; vestida para la cena, si es necesario, así tendremos más tiempo; hemos pedido un coche que la devolverá a su casa». La señora Assingham, después de rápida aunque quizá no lúcida deliberación, se vistió y a las siete se encontraba en la casa de Portland Place en donde su amiga, que le dijeron que se hallaba «arriba» vistiéndose, la recibió al instante.

La pobre Fanny comprendió inmediatamente, como luego manifestaría al coronel, que su tan tímida crisis se había producido ya, que su momento insoportable estaba allí ante ella como por efectos de haber accionado un resorte. Su momento insoportable era aquel en que saldría a relucir que de tiempo atrás sabía muchas más cosas de las que había dicho; y en su aprensión había imaginado, e incluso había procurado prepararse al efecto, que reconocería la proximidad de su hecatombe por medio de una sensación muy parecida a la que se tiene cuando una ventana se abre de par en par de golpe durante una noche de máximo viento y mínima temperatura. De nada le serviría haber estado tanto tiempo agazapada junto al fuego del hogar. Los vidrios quedarían todos rotos y el aire helado llenaría la estancia. Si bien el aire en la habitación de Maggie todavía no había llegado a la temperatura polar que Fanny temía cuando subió, también es cierto que allí dominaba una atmósfera que las dos juntas jamás habían respirado. Fanny advirtió que la Princesa ya estaba totalmente vestida; este asunto ya había sido despachado, y daba mayor importancia al hecho de que la Princesa aguardara la llegada de la señora Assingham, en cumplimiento de su ruego, e indicaba que el terreno estaba despejado, valga la expresión, permitiendo entrar en acción inmediatamente. La doncella ya había dejado a la Princesa; ésta, en la amplia y clara estancia en donde todo era admirable, sin nada fuera de lugar, presentaba por primera vez en su vida un aspecto de excesiva vistosidad en su atavío. ¿Se debía a que se había puesto demasiadas cosas?, ¿a que iba recargada de joyas, pues principalmente llevaba más de las habituales y más grandes en la cabeza? La señora Assingham contestó a esta pregunta atribuyendo esta apariencia en gran parte a la intensa mancha roja, roja como un rubí monstruoso, que ardía en cada una de las mejillas de la Princesa. Estos dos aspectos en el semblante de Maggie enseguida iluminaron a la señora Assingham, quien concluyó que no cabía imaginar nada más patético que aquel refugio y disfraz que la agitación de Maggie había solicitado instintivamente a las artes indumentarias, multiplicadas hasta la prodigalidad, casi hasta la incoherencia. Evidentemente, había actuado en cumplimiento de una idea, la de no traicionarse mediante el descuidado desaliño en que jamás había incurrido; ahora estaba allí rodeada de unos muebles y en un ambiente que, como siempre, daba testimonio de sus perfectos y detallados procesos personales. Siempre le había sido propio el que en todas las ocasiones la encontraran preparada, sin cabos sueltos, sin detalles reveladores, sin elementos superfluos no eliminados, lo que sugería a la mente un ambiente barrido y pulido, espléndido en términos generales, aun cuando, precisamente por ello, más o menos atestado y adornado, que reflejaba su pequeña pasión por el orden y la simetría, por tener los objetos con su dorso arrimado a la pared, y que indicaba la probable afinidad de Maggie, por su sangre norteamericana, con abuelas de Nueva Inglaterra entregadas siempre a quitar el polvo y a sacar brillo.

Si las habitaciones de Maggie tenían aspecto «principesco», a la luz de la última hora de la tarde, también Maggie causaba la impresión de haber sido transportada allí debidamente preparada, ataviada y adornada, como una sagrada imagen en una procesión, y dejada allí exactamente con el fin de demostrar la manera en que sabía comportarse en momentos de tensión. Su amiga experimentaba los mismos sentimientos —¿cómo podía dejar de ser así?— que siente el sacerdote verdaderamente piadoso cuando mira, antes de acercarse al altar para la celebración, a su Virgen milagrosa. Semejante ocasión es siempre grave, dotada de toda la gravedad de lo que el sacerdote ansíe ver, pero la gravedad en aquella noche sería sumamente insólita, y lo que el sacerdote ansiara ver dependería de lo que estuviera dispuesto a dar.

Capítulo XXXIII

—Ha ocurrido algo muy extraño que creo debe usted saber.

Maggie pronunció estas palabras sin énfasis, pero de una manera que permitió a su amiga calibrar de nuevo la capacidad de atracción de Maggie. Había llegado a un acuerdo definitivo: todo lo que Fanny supiera quedaría amparado por su fe. Y Fanny supo, al término de cinco minutos, en qué consistía lo extraordinario últimamente ocurrido y la manera en que todo había sucedido a resultas de aquella hora pasada en el Museo bajo los auspicios del señor Crichton. Llevado por su característica amabilidad, el señor Crichton había mostrado deseos, después de la maravillosa exhibición, después de haber ofrecido la ocasión de almorzar en las habitaciones adyacentes, de acompañar a Maggie para dejarla en casa; insistió al reparar, al acompañarla hasta el pie de la escalinata, en que Maggie había despedido su coche, cosa que hizo con el concreto fin de gozar de la inocente diversión de recorrer el trayecto sola. De antemano había sabido Maggie que, a consecuencia de aquella hora en el Museo, se encontraría en un exaltado estado de ánimo, bajo cuya influencia un paseo a pie por las calles de Londres sería exactamente lo que mejor le sentaría, un paseo sin rumbo, con total independencia, impresionada, excitada, satisfecha, sin nada en qué pensar, sin nadie con quien hablar, con tantos escaparates como quisiera para mirar, afición humilde que cabía suponer era propia de su carácter, y que en los últimos tiempos, por muchas razones, no había podido satisfacer. Maggie se había despedido, no sin antes expresar su agradecimiento. Conocía bien su camino, y albergaba la tímida esperanza de no seguirlo con excesiva rectitud. Vagar sin rumbo era lo que realmente le gustaría. En consecuencia, evitando Oxford Street, y cultivando la sensación de hallarse en lugares desconocidos, había terminado consiguiendo aquello que vagamente su fantasía le había propuesto, y que era encontrar tres o cuatro tiendas: la de un librero de viejo, la de un vendedor de grabados antiguos y un par de comercios con oscuras antigüedades en el escaparate, que se diferenciaban de las restantes tiendas como, por ejemplo, de las de Sloane Street, huero despliegue que había dejado de atraer a Maggie. Además, en su mente había quedado una alusión efectuada por Charlotte pocos meses atrás, semilla sembrada en su imaginación bajo la forma de casual conversación referente a la existencia, en Bloomsbury, de «divertidas y fascinantes tiendecillas», en las que incluso cabía efectuar imprevistos hallazgos. Esta ocasión de romántica oportunidad quizá fuera el más fuerte, el más vivo síntoma, de la impresión que en Maggie causaba siempre —impresión que retenía y alimentaba durante largo tiempo—, cualquier observación de Charlotte por muy a la ligera que la hiciera. En aquellos instantes, sin saber por qué, se sintió mucho más tranquila de lo que en cualquier otro momento había estado en el curso de los meses precedentes. Ignoraba la razón, pero su visita al Museo, de una forma extraña, le había causado este efecto. Parecía que le hubiese producido muchas, nobles y hermosas ideas percibidas no sólo con referencia a su hijo, sino también con referencia a su propio padre, sin ver luego cómo se transformaban en vanidad y dudas, o quizá incluso en algo todavía peor.

Fijos y brillantes los ojos, Maggie dijo:

—Volví a creer en él igual que antes, y me di cuenta de que creía en él. Mientras caminaba por las calles me daba cuenta de ello y el estar allí sola, sin tener que indagar y vigilar por el momento, sino, al contrario, sin pensar en nada, me causaba una sensación de paz y me levantaba los ánimos.

Para que todo saliera a pedir de boca, Maggie se acordó del cumpleaños de su padre, y con este motivo

buscó algo que ofrecerle. Conservaría el regalo en Fawns, como había hecho en anteriores ocasiones, ya que él celebraba su aniversario el día veintiuno del mes, por lo que quizá no tuviera otra oportunidad de comprarle algo. Desde luego, era preciso tener en cuenta la imposibilidad de encontrar una cosa que fuera medianamente «buena» y que su padre no hubiera visto ya, tiempo atrás, en sus búsquedas, por no hablar de algo que fuera casi «bueno». Sin embargo, esto era ya sabido y hubiera sido imposible gozar del placer de regalarle algo si no hubiera sido por su amable doctrina según la cual todo regalo personal, toda ofrenda amistosa era, forzosamente y por implacable ley natural, una aberración; y cuanto más aberrante fuera el objeto más revelaba, y por más revelarlo más se apreciaba, el afecto con que era ofrecido. La deficiencia del arte revelaba la sinceridad del amor, la vulgaridad del linaje simbolizaba el refinamiento de la simpatía; en realidad, los más feos objetos eran, por lo general, los más gallardos y tiernos recuerdos; éstos se guardaban en vitrinas separadas, dignas sin duda alguna del hogar, aunque no dignas del templo, vitrinas dedicadas no a los dioses de claro rostro, sino a los de contorsionado gesto. Como es natural, en el curso de los últimos años Maggie había contribuido en gran medida a llenar estos receptáculos con objetos que la representaban; a Maggie todavía le gustaba aplastar la nariz contra los gruesos y cerrados vidrios, y encontrar siempre en su debido lugar todos aquellos regalos que en los sucesivos aniversarios de su padre se esforzó en creer que éste fingiría, al ver el objeto, quedar sorprendido o por lo menos experimentar curiosidad. Ahora estaba dispuesta a volver a intentarlo. Los dos, con el placer que la ficción de Maggie producía a su padre, y con el placer que la de éste producía en ella, con el divertido espectáculo del sacrificio de los buenos modales domésticos, jugaban felizmente a este juego. Con este fin, y mientras regresaba a pie a su casa, Maggie curioseó en todas partes, con desilusión entre los viejos libros y los viejos grabados, entre los que nada encontró que sirviera a sus propósitos; pero se dio una extraña ingenuidad en otra tiendecilla, la de un menudo anticuario extranjero, raro hombrecillo que le había mostrado buen número de objetos; por fin, algo que la sorprendió por su rareza, y que, al considerar que, en comparación con anteriores y aventuradas compras, cumpliría extraordinariamente su función, Maggie compró, compró, por cierto, ya que todo hay que decirlo, a no menguado precio.

Maggie dijo:

—Pero ahora resulta que no puedo regalárselo a papá. Ha ocurrido algo que lo impide de forma absoluta. Comprar este objeto ha sido al principio sólo una satisfacción ahora, al verlo ante mí me doy cuenta de que por nada del mundo me conformaría con no haberlo encontrado.

Desde el momento en que su amiga entró, Maggie había hablado con notable sentido, incluso con una leve vacilación en la voz que ponía de relieve su calma; pero contenía el aliento a breves intervalos, como si quisiera hablar con deliberación y demostrar que no jadeaba, todo lo cual hizo comprender a Fanny la profundidad de la conmoción que sentía. Entretanto, la referencia que hizo en sus pensamientos acerca de su padre sobre la oportunidad de encontrar algo que le regocijara, sobre la fortaleza de que éste daba muestra en el duro trance de recibir regalos, todo ello tuvo, y debemos decirlo, mucha menos insistencia y amplitud en los labios de quien hablaba que intensidad en la reacción de quien escuchaba, plena de comprensión del recuerdo y simpatía de antiguas y divertidas observaciones, en quien escuchaba. La cariñosa fantasía de ésta completó el cuadro. De todas maneras, Maggie se había alzado en armas, sabía lo que hacía y ya había trazado su plan de acción, un plan encaminado a que no se notara cambio alguno todavía, de acuerdo con el cual asistiría a aquella cena, pero no con los ojos enrojecidos ni con el rostro convulso, no con aspecto desaliñado y sin detalle alguno que pudiera suscitar curiosidad. Sin embargo, a fin de dar apoyo a sus esfuerzos para no derrumbarse, deseaba, necesitaba saber algo. Con el siniestro zig-zag del rayo, sin el acompañamiento de truenos ante su vista, la señora Assingham supo que estaba obligada, fuera cual fuese el riesgo y a toda costa, a suministrar a Maggie un conocimiento muy necesario. Los instintos de nuestra amiga unánimemente le decían que debía abstenerse, y hasta saber qué terreno pisaba, no daría ni un paso para acercarse a Maggie mientras no pudiera darlo inteligentemente, y a pesar de que resultara embarazoso tener que estar allí en suspenso, pálida y desorientada, diciendo simplezas y vaguedades, no dejaba de constituir una fuerte ayuda el hecho de que la señora Assingham todavía no podía imaginar siquiera adónde conduciría tan temible principio. Sin embargo, la señora Assingham, al cabo de unos segundos de reflexión, se agarró a la referencia que Maggie había hecho sobre la pérdida de la seguridad en sí misma:

—¿Quiere decir que el lunes, cuando cenó en nuestra casa, estaba tranquila?

Maggie repuso:

—Fui muy feliz aquella noche.

—Sí, a nuestro parecer, estuvo alegre y brillante.

A pesar de que estas palabras le parecieron un tanto flojas, Fanny Assingham prosiguió:

—Nos alegró mucho verla feliz.

Durante unos instantes, Maggie se limitó a mirar a la señora Assingham; por fin, preguntó:

—¿Me porté bien?

—Claro que sí, querida, se portó bien.

—Pues me atrevería a decir que fue un comportamiento natural, a pesar de que en mi vida he estado más equivocada, ya que entretanto esto se estaba cociendo.

La señora Assingham advirtió que ahora la vista de la Princesa se había fijado en un objeto que estaba sobre la repisa del hogar; un objeto, entre tantos objetos preciosos, en el que la visitante de la Princesa no había reparado, ya que los Verver estuvieran donde estuviesen, siempre gozaban adornando con incomparables piezas las repisas de sus hogares. La señora Assingham dijo:

—¿Se refiere a esa copa dorada?

—Me refiero a esa copa dorada.

Aquel objeto que Fanny advirtió ahora que contemplaba por vez primera era un amplio cuenco de oro llamativamente amarillo y, al parecer, viejo, sobre un corto vástago que terminaba formando un amplio pie; cuenco que ocupaba el centro de la repisa de la cual, para que destacara, se habían quitado los restantes objetos, echándose principalmente en falta el reloj Luis XVI que acompañaba a los candelabros. Ahora este trofeo emitía un tictac sobre el mármol de una cómoda que armonizaba perfectamente con él, tanto por su estilo como por su esplendor. La señora Assingham estimó que el cuenco era un objeto precioso, pero no se trataba, evidentemente, de su valor intrínseco, por lo que la señora Assingham se abstuvo de abordar este tema, y se limitó a contemplar la copa desde lejos. Dijo:

—Pero ¿qué tiene que ver…?

—Lo tiene que ver todo. Ahora lo verá.

Después de decir estas palabras, Maggie volvió a mirarla en silencio con los ojos extrañamente dilatados. Luego, dijo:

—La conocía antes. La conocía incluso antes de que yo le conociera a él.

Mientras Fanny buscaba en vano los eslabones que echaba en falta en aquella concatenación, sólo pudo repetir igual que el eco.

—¿«Él» conocía…?

—Americo conocía a Charlotte mucho más de lo que yo jamás hubiera podido imaginar.

En este instante Fanny tuvo la impresión de que podía contestar con igual mirada que la de Maggie, y dijo:

—Pero usted siempre ha sabido que se conocían.

La Princesa respondió:

—Sí, pero no podía comprenderlo. No sabía lo bastante. ¿Comprende lo que quiero decir?

La señora Assingham se preguntó hasta qué punto estaba ella enterada de la realidad de este asunto y se dio cuenta, casi al cabo de un minuto, de lo muy suavemente que Maggie había hablado. Al notar que Maggie no la retaba con ira, que no había en sus palabras el ardor del alma engañada, sino tan sólo una libre exposición de su total pasada ignorancia, que permitía incluso la burla, en el caso de que la suscitara, la mayor de las dos mujeres experimentó, al principio, una extraña y apenas verosímil sensación de alivio, y extrajo, como si se tratara del cálido aroma veraniego de una flor, la dulce certidumbre de que, hiciera lo que hiciera, no tendría que afrontar juicio alguno. No, no sería juzgada, salvo por ella misma, lo cual era asunto tristemente suyo. Lo cierto es, sin embargo, que al momento Fanny Assingham se ruborizó por su inicial cobardía, puesto que sólo había pensado en sí misma, en «salir del trance», sin pararse siquiera a considerar, sin percatarse con dolor que estaba en presencia de una petición de ayuda, que todo era una petición de ayuda en un reconocido estado de suma necesidad.

—Hija mía, en términos generales, sí. Aunque no… no, en relación con lo que me ha estado diciendo.

La Princesa dijo:

—Eran íntimos, ¿comprende? Íntimos.

Fanny siguió mirándola, leyendo en sus ojos excitados aquella historia perteneciente a tiempos pasados, que resultaba oscura y débil a pesar del angustiado énfasis de la Princesa. La señora Assingham dijo:

—Bueno, también hay que tener en cuenta lo que se entiende por…

—¿Lo que se entiende por intimidad? Sé muy bien ahora lo que entiendo por intimidad. Eran tan

íntimos que no pueden decírmelo.

Fue una respuesta clara, pero no lo bastante clara como para hacer vacilar a su vieja amiga:

—¿Acaso quiere usted decir que sólo a mí podrían decírmelo?

Fanny había hablado después de dejar pasar unos instantes en silencio. Ahora volvió a mirar el nuevo objeto en la repisa del hogar, maravillándose incluso mientras la contemplación de la copa dorada la aliviaba de las lagunas que había en su información. Dijo:

—Querida, en lo tocante a ciertos asuntos, mi ignorancia es perfecta.

—Iban juntos a todas partes. Se sabe que iban juntos. Y no sólo antes, sino también después.

—¿Después?

—No sólo antes de que nos casáramos, sino después de que nos prometiéramos en matrimonio.

Con valerosa seguridad, agarrándose aliviada a algo que era evidentemente nuevo para ella, Fanny Assingham repuso:

—¡De esto nada sé!

Maggie prosiguió:

—Y esta copa, aunque parezca raro, tan raro que ahora resulte casi increíble, constituye la prueba de lo que he dicho. Estuvieron siempre juntos, hasta la víspera de nuestro matrimonio. ¿No recuerda que Charlotte regresó de América sin previo aviso, poco antes de que me casara?

Para la señora Assingham esta pregunta tenía —tanto si de ello era plenamente consciente como si no— los más extraños matices del atractivo de la sencillez:

—Desde luego, recuerdo muy bien que Charlotte vino de América, que estuvo viviendo en nuestra casa, y también recuerdo la opinión que su regreso nos mereció.

En todo momento, la mirada de Maggie seguía siendo fija y penetrante; por un instante causó la impresión de tener una pequeña explosión, de dar el pequeño golpe de preguntar cuál era aquella «opinión» a la que Fanny Assingham se había referido. Durante unos instantes, Fanny quedó alerta, en espera de que surgiera la llamarada de aquel pequeño estallido, pero pronto vio que la amenaza desaparecía; vio con toda claridad que la Princesa, a pesar de su dolor, se negaba por extraño y apasionado pacto a aprovechar la oportunidad de darle la puñalada del reproche, oportunidad que se había presentado por sí misma. Fanny vio a la Princesa —o pensó que la veía— como si examinara la oportunidad para cortar tajantemente el trato con ella, como si considerara atentamente aquella oportunidad y, luego, pasara de largo; y al percatarse de semejante hecho, quedó muda por la admiración que sintió hacia aquel lúcido y enaltecido espíritu, que no había desdicha que pudiera confundir, ni descubrimiento —que, aunque de forma oscura, de un descubrimiento se trataba— que pudiera menguar su entereza. Estos breves segundos transcurrieron deprisa, pero duraron lo suficiente para renovar en nuestra amiga la sensación de lo muy extraordinario que era su empeño, la función que de nuevo recaía sobre ella, y de nuevo tuvo el sentido de la responsabilidad. Le habían recordado las condiciones por las que había quedado libre de obligaciones y su liberación había quedado debidamente indicada al recordar su relación con la antigua reaparición de Charlotte; en el fondo de la impresión experimentada por Fanny Assingham resplandecía, de una manera que le estimulaba en gran manera, su constante comprensión, clara desde el primer momento, de la nobleza de los motivos de su amiga. Era como un nuevo sacrificio para emprender una mayor conquista, que podría expresarse con las siguientes palabras: «Sáqueme de este trance ahora, hágalo ante lo que ocurre y a pesar de lo que ocurre; luego le concederé una libertad de cuya amplitud ni siquiera vale la pena hablar». El incremento del temor de Maggie —o llamémosle, si parece, del conocimiento de Maggie— ocupó inmediatamente en su espíritu el lugar que le correspondía en cuanto a un mayor temor por su padre, y el efecto que esto le produjo fue que transformó en pasión las razones que tenía para transformar la protección de su padre, o dicho en otras palabras, su ignorancia en la ley que había de regir su comportamiento y en la clave de las soluciones que adoptara. Maggie oprimía contra sí, en su inconfundible horror, estas razones y estas formas con la misma fuerza que un jinete que monta un caballo de saltos oprime la silla con las rodillas; Maggie hubiera podido declarar muy bien a su invitada que estaba convencida de que permanecería en la silla, siempre y cuando dichas razones y formas sólo cumplieran esta función. Fanny, que todavía ignoraba qué era aquello con lo que se había tropezado, en su fuero interno ansiaba saber las causas que turbaban el espíritu de Maggie y, de esta manera, sin decir palabra, sólo por medio de sus ojos apiadados, expresó la exhortación a que siguiera adelante con una linterna para disipar las tinieblas e indicar el tránsito inadvertido que se desviara y, al llegar a la encrucijada, buscar los motivos de alarma. En consecuencia, Maggie repuso inmediatamente:

—Pasaron horas juntos, pasaron toda una mañana juntos, por lo menos, de lo cual he podido tener la certeza ahora, a pesar de que ni siquiera pude soñarlo en aquel entonces. Esta copa se ha convertido en testigo, por el más maravilloso de los azares. Ésta es la razón por la que, desde que la copa llegó a esta casa, la he tenido aquí para que mi marido la viera; la he puesto en un lugar en el que pueda verla casi inmediatamente, caso de que venga a esta habitación.

Maggie hizo una pausa y prosiguió:

—Quiero que la copa reciba a mi marido, y que mi marido reciba a la copa; quiero estar presente en ese encuentro. Pero esto no ha ocurrido todavía, a pesar de que en los últimos tiempos mi marido ha venido a menudo a mis habitaciones; sí, especialmente en los últimos tiempos. Pero hoy no ha venido aún.

Maggie hablaba de manera que su voluntariamente impuesta serenidad iba en constante aumento, hablaba con una coherencia laboriosamente conseguida que la ayudaba, evidentemente, a medir sus palabras y a refrenar su comportamiento. Los hechos que ahora invocaba constituían para ella una ayuda y, en consecuencia, eran fuente de una formidable armonía y, al mismo tiempo, eran una guía de sus pasos:

—Parece exactamente que Americo haya tenido una intuición, que algo le haya advertido que no le convenía venir aquí o que algo le haya inquietado. Como es natural, no sabe con exactitud lo ocurrido, pero intuye con su maravillosa inteligencia que algo hay, y prefiere demorar el momento de enfrentarse con ello. Llevado por un vago temor, se mantiene alejado de estas habitaciones.

—Pero ¿está en casa?

—No lo sé. Hoy, excepcionalmente, no le he visto desde antes del almuerzo.

Recordando lo ocurrido, la Princesa explicó sin necesidad de que Fanny Assingham se lo pidiera:

—Me ha hablado de una votación en un club; una votación de gran importancia que atañe a cierta persona, a un amigo suyo, creo, que está destacando mucho, pero que ahora se encuentra en peligro. Para ayudar a este amigo, ha pensado que lo más conveniente sería almorzar en el club. Ya ve lo que es capaz de hacer por sus amigos.

Al decir estas palabras, esbozó una sonrisa que conmovió el corazón de su amiga. Luego añadió:

—En muchos aspectos, es el hombre más amable del mundo. Pero lo que acabo de contarle ocurrió hace ya horas.

La señora Assingham se sumió en sus pensamientos. «De lo cual se deduce que es mayor el peligro de que el Príncipe regrese y me encuentre aquí. De todos modos la verdad es que ignoro qué es lo que tú, Maggie, consideras que has demostrado, y tampoco sé la relación que guarda con ese objeto que tan acusador estimas». Los ojos de Fanny Assingham se fijaron en aquella extraña adquisición; luego Fanny apartó la vista, volvió a fijarla en el objeto y volvió a apartarla. Aquel objeto era inescrutable en su un tanto estúpida elegancia y, sin embargo, desde el instante en que se le había definido de esta manera, dominaba el escenario vívida y definitivamente. Ahora Fanny no podía hacer caso omiso de aquel objeto en la misma medida que tampoco hubiera podido ignorar la presencia de un árbol de Navidad iluminado. En vano Fanny Assingham buscó nerviosamente en su memoria un vago recuerdo del objeto en cuestión. En el mismo instante que este intento daba resultado nulo, comprendió con toda notable claridad, a pesar de que no las compartía en absoluto, las místicas aprensiones de la Princesa. La copa dorada, después de haber sido debidamente contemplada, adquirió visos de consciente perversidad y, de todas maneras, en cuanto a «documento», era fea, a pesar de tener cierta gracia decorativa. Fanny dijo:

—Si el Príncipe me encuentra aquí, en presencia de este objeto, puede ser más flagrantemente desagradable para todos nosotros de lo que usted desea, o de lo que es preciso para que constituya una ayuda para nosotros. Por otra parte, necesito cierto tiempo para llegar a comprender el significado de este objeto.

A estas palabras, Maggie repuso:

—No se preocupe que no corre usted peligro alguno. Le puedo asegurar que el Príncipe no vendrá, y que sólo le veré cuando baje para subir al coche, ya que entonces le encontraré esperándome.

Fanny Assingham comprendió lo que la Princesa quería decir, y mucho más. Entonces, dijo:

—En este caso, ¿resulta que tendremos que compartir juntos la cena en la embajada o, por lo menos, ustedes dos tendrán que hacerlo con esta nueva complicación todavía no explicada pesando sobre su espíritu, y tendrán que mirarse, manteniendo en la cara una expresión con la que finja en tan desagradable momento ignorarlo todo?

Maggie miró a Fanny con una expresión en su rostro que hubiera podido ser la que estaba preparando para las horas venideras, y dijo:

—¿«Todavía no explicada», querida? Todo lo contrario, explicada, plena, intensa y admirablemente explicada, sin necesidad de añadir nada más. Realmente, no quiero saber nada más. Con lo que sé tengo más que suficiente para pensar y actuar.

La señora Assingham siguió allí, sumida en su relativa ignorancia, dándose cuenta de que realmente le faltaban muchos eslabones, aunque el más aceptable efecto radicaba singularmente en un frío temor a acercarse a la verdad. Fanny dijo:

—¿Y cuándo regresen a casa? Quiero decir que él subirá aquí con usted y entonces la verá.

Después de escuchar estas palabras, Maggie dio visibles muestras de sopesar; luego efectuó un lento y extrañísimo movimiento negativo con la cabeza y dijo:

—No lo sé. Quizá Americo jamás la vea, si es que la copa se queda aquí esperándole. Quizá mi marido jamás vuelva a entrar en esta estancia.

Las dudas de Fanny fueron ahora profundas:

—¿Jamás? ¡Oh…!

Serenamente, Maggie repuso:

—Sí, puede ser. ¿Cómo voy a saberlo? ¡Con esto aquí!

Al decir estas palabras, Maggie volvió a mirar el acusador objeto, y Fanny Assingham quedó maravillada de lo mucho que tan breves palabras expresaban ante ella la situación de la Princesa. Fanny dijo:

—¿Se propone no decirle nada?

Maggie esperó un poco y preguntó:

—¿No decirle?

—¿No decirle que tiene esta copa, ni hablarle de lo que representa, según usted?

—Creo que no le diré nada si él no me dice nada. De todas maneras, el hecho de que se mantenga alejado de aquí ¿qué es sino algo equivalente a hablar? Realmente mi esposo no puede decir más.

Maggie hizo una pausa; en tono diferente, en uno de los tonos que ya había impresionado profundamente a su amiga, añadió:

—No soy yo quien debe hablar. A mí me toca escuchar.

La señora Assingham sacó una conclusión:

—En ese caso, ¿todo depende de este objeto del que usted tiene razones para considerar que constituye una prueba?

—Creo que puedo decir que soy yo quien depende del objeto. Ahora bien, no puedo estimar que no signifique nada.

Al escuchar estas palabras, la señora Assingham se acercó a la copa sobre la repisa del hogar, haciéndolo además animada por el deseo de que no comportara acercarse también al parecer de la Princesa. Miró el precioso objeto —si era precioso—, y se descubrió a sí misma contemplándolo como si en un oscuro empeño intentara arrancarle su secreto para no tener que padecer la imposición del parecer de Maggie. Se trataba de un objeto recio, rico y firme, con su profunda concavidad. Prescindiendo de la tortura que el objeto representaba, hubiera sido para Fanny, por su amor a la abundancia de amarillo, un envidiable ornamento, una posesión realmente deseable. Fanny no tocó la copa; pero al cabo de un rato, cuando dio media vuelta y se alejó de ella, lo hizo como si la razón de tal actitud fuera un extraño y repentino miedo de hacerlo. Dijo:

—En este caso, ¿todo depende de esa copa? Quiero decir ¿que su futuro depende de la copa? Por lo menos, así me ha parecido entenderlo. Maggie repuso:

—Lo importante es que este objeto me ha puesto, de tan milagrosa manera, en el camino de llegar a saber hasta qué punto llegaron los dos al principio. Si tanto hubo entre ellos dos anteriormente, a juzgar por las apariencias, difícilmente puede no haber mucho más ahora.

Maggie prosiguió, siguiendo su camino firmemente, paso a paso:

—Si semejantes cosas mediaban ya entre ellos en aquel tiempo, esto basta para disipar toda posible duda acerca de lo que puede haber ocurrido entre ellos desde entonces. Si anteriormente nada hubiera habido, ahora cabría la posibilidad de alguna explicación. Pero ahora hay demasiado que explicar. Y me refiero a explicaciones que les eximan de culpa.

Fanny Assingham estaba allí para dar explicaciones y de ello tenía plena conciencia, por lo menos hasta el presente así había sido. Sin embargo, a la luz de la argumentación de Maggie, lo que era preciso exculpar, incluso teniendo en cuenta la vaguedad que Maggie empleaba, parecía de más envergadura que en cualquier otro momento. Además, prescindiendo de la vaguedad o de la exactitud de ella, el efecto que

producía cada minuto que Fanny Assingham pasaba en aquel lugar era ponerla más y más cerca de lo que Maggie veía. La propia Maggie veía la verdad, y esto bastaba, mientras las dos estaban juntas, para que ella también entrara en relación con esa verdad. El modo en que la Princesa se enfrentaba con aquella verdad estaba dotado de tal fuerza que los detalles de lo que conociera o no conociera carecían de importancia. En realidad, la necesidad que de preguntar detalles tenía Maggie le causaba algo parecido a una pasajera vergüenza. Al cabo de un rato, la señora Assingham dijo:

—No intentará negar las impresiones que en mí produjeron los diferentes momentos a que usted se refiere, de la misma manera que no puedo olvidar las dificultades y, como en todo momento me pareció, los peligros que todo tipo de actuación que decidiera llevar a cabo para mí comportaba. Me esforcé, me esforcé seriamente, en actuar en beneficio de todos.

La señora Assingham guardó silencio unos instantes y luego prosiguió, mientras al oír el sonido de sus propias palabras, cierta valentía y también cierta débilmente cálida convicción volvían a su ánimo:

—Y quiero que sepa que creo que todo esto es lo que resultará que hice.

Estas palabras dieron lugar a un intervalo en el que el diálogo de las dos, si bien acelerado y ya más profundo, sólo tuvo lugar mediante el silencio de un mirar fijo y denso, todo lo cual quedó virtualmente ratificado cuando Maggie dijo:

—Tengo la seguridad de que actuó con la intención de beneficiarnos a todos.

Fanny volvió a guardar un minuto de silencio, y dijo:

—Jamás pensé, querida, que no fuera usted un ángel.

¡De poca ayuda le fueron estas palabras! La Princesa dijo:

—Aquello duró hasta las mismísimas vísperas, ¿comprende?, hasta dos y tres días antes de nuestra boda. ¿Se da cuenta?

Y al terminar de hablar, esbozó una extraña sonrisa.

—Sí, esto ocurrió mientras ella vivía en mi casa, como he dicho. Pero yo lo ignoraba. Quiero decir que no sabía nada en concreto.

Fanny Assingham se dio cuenta de que su argumentación era un tanto débil, pero tenía aún que esgrimir su verdadero razonamiento, a lo que procedió inmediatamente:

—Lo que quiero decir es que no sé ahora en lo que se refiere a conocer detalles, nada que no supiera entonces. Ésta es la situación en que me encuentro.

Sin embargo, vaciló un poco y aclaró:

—Quiero decir la situación en que me encontraba.

Maggie preguntó:

—Pero ¿el lugar en que se encuentra y el lugar en que se encontraba no viene a ser el mismo, a fin de cuentas?

Las palabras de la mayor de las mujeres habían causado a Maggie la impresión de haberse pronunciado en un tono ahora inoportuno, propio del reciente acuerdo basado en las apariencias según el cual nada había que pudiera probarse, del mismo modo que nada había que pudiera desmentirse con seguridad. Pero ahora la situación había variado debido a que había aparecido lo definitivo, fuera lo que fuese, y le permitía a Maggie adoptar una posición firme. Y notablemente firme se mostró Maggie cuando dijo:

—¡Duró en todo momento mientras Americo se disponía a casarse conmigo!

Los ojos de Maggie volvieron a fijarse en aquella evidente prueba:

—¡Y esto lo demuestra! ¡Esto lo demuestra!

Pero ahora Maggie fijó la vista en su interlocutora, y dijo:

—¡Y seguía durando cuando papá se casó con ella!

La señora Assingham se defendió lo mejor que pudo:

—Puede usted estar segura de que los dos se casaron animados por las más notables intenciones.

—¡Papá sí, sin la menor duda!

Al volver a tener conciencia de ello, Maggie se sintió arrastrada por el oleaje de sus sentimientos:

—¡Hacernos semejante jugada! ¡Hacérnosla a nosotros, hacerla entre nosotros! ¡Día tras día! ¡Y en pago de, en pago de…! ¡Hacerle esto a él! ¡A él!

Dubitativa, Fanny preguntó:

—¿Quiere decir con esto que sufre por él?

La Princesa, después de dirigir una mirada a Fanny, dio media vuelta y comenzó a pasear por la estancia, lo cual produjo el efecto de que la pregunta de la señora Assingham hubiera sido una

impertinencia. Fanny Assingham prosiguió:

—Se lo pregunto porque estimo que todo, todo eso de que estamos hablando, puede ser para él, mejor dicho, podemos conseguir que sea para él totalmente inexistente.

En el mismo instante Maggie daba media vuelta, se enfrentaba con ella y decía como si no hubiera oído sus palabras:

—¡Papá lo hizo por mí, todo lo hizo por mí y sólo por mí!

La señora Assingham, con indudable rapidez, levantó la cabeza. Antes de hablar vaciló un poco:

—¡Bueno…!

Sólo fue una palabra intencionada, pero Maggie, al cabo de un instante, dio muestras de haber comprendido su alcance:

—¿Cree que ésta es la razón? ¿Cree que esto es una razón?

Sin embargo, Fanny al principio, dándose cuenta de que en estas palabras de la Princesa se contenía la respuesta a su observación, no dijo todo lo que quería decir y, por el momento, dijo otra cosa:

—Su padre lo hizo por usted; en gran medida, al menos, lo hizo por usted. Y también fue por usted por quien yo hice, en menor medida e interesadamente, todo lo que pude.

La señora Assingham hizo una pausa y prosiguió:

—Ciertamente algo pude hacer. Estimaba que veía lo que le beneficiaba a usted, de la misma manera que su padre también lo veía. Y estimaba que también veía lo que beneficiaba a Charlotte. Tengo fe en ella.

Maggie exclamó:

—¡También yo tengo fe en ella!

La señora Assingham volvió a esperar antes de responder. Pero en esta ocasión siguió adelante en su camino:

—Y Charlotte tiene fe en sí misma.

Maggie murmuró:

—¿Qué?

Algo exquisito, levemente entusiasta en su espontánea sencillez, pareció empujar a la señora Assingham a avanzar más:

—Y el Príncipe tenía fe. Su fe era auténtica. De la misma manera que también tenía fe en sí mismo.

Maggie se esforzó durante un minuto en intentar comprender a su amiga; por fin, preguntó:

—¿Que el Príncipe tenía fe en sí mismo?

—¡De la misma forma que yo tenía fe en él! ¡Fe absoluta, Maggie! Y añadió a estas palabras:

—Y todavía tengo fe en él a pesar de todo.

Palabras que matizó con las siguientes:

—Quiero decir que creo en él.

Maggie aceptó esta manifestación. Después volvió a quedar inquieta, como flotando. Cuando este estado de ánimo llegó a su término, preguntó:

—¿Y todavía tiene fe en Charlotte?

La señora Assingham tuvo una vacilación que ahora creía poder permitirse, y dijo:

—Hablaremos de Charlotte cualquier otro día. De todas maneras, en aquel entonces, los dos se creían a salvo de todo peligro.

—En ese caso, ¿por qué me ocultaron esas cosas, todas las cosas que yo podía saber?

La señora Assingham la miró con suma dulzura, y le preguntó:

—¿Y por qué se las oculté yo misma?

—¡Usted no estaba obligada a decírmelas!

Al escuchar estas palabras, la pobre mujer exclamó:

—¡Queridísima Maggie, es usted divina!

La Princesa prosiguió:

—¡Y pretendían quererme! ¡Y pretendían quererle a él!

—¿Y puede decirme, por favor, qué no pretendía yo?

—Por lo menos no pretendía que yo le importaba tanto como Americo y como Charlotte. Los dos eran mucho más interesantes, lo que me parece perfectamente natural.

Y remató estas palabras con la siguiente pregunta:

—¿Cómo no iba a gustarle Americo?

La señora Assingham se rindió:

—Efectivamente, ¿cómo no iba a gustarme?

Después, con noble libertad, la señora Assingham recorrió el resto de su camino:

—¿Y cómo no va a gustarme?

Esto motivó que Maggie, dilatados los ojos, fijara de nuevo la vista en la señora Assingham:

—Comprendo… comprendo. Me parece muy hermoso que sea capaz de experimentar estos sentimientos.

Después de una pausa, Maggie añadió:

—¿Y, desde luego, también deseaba ayudar a Charlotte?

Fanny pensó un poco, y repuso:

—Sí, deseaba ayudar a Charlotte. Pero también deseaba ayudarla a usted, no desenterrando un pasado sobre el que se habían acumulado tantos hechos que yo consideraba profundamente enterrados.

Y declaró, en modo alguno cicatera:

—Deseaba, como sigo deseando, ayudar a todos.

Estas palabras pusieron una vez más a Maggie en movimiento, movimiento que cesó dando, con ello, súbito énfasis a sus palabras:

—En este caso, si todo comenzó tan bien, ¿la culpa es en gran parte mía?

Fanny Assingham contestó lo mejor que pudo:

—Sólo se la puede acusar de ser excesivamente buena, de haber pensado excesivamente…

Pero la Princesa ya había dado su interpretación a estas palabras:

—¡Sí, he pensado demasiado!

Y Maggie causó la impresión de que fuera a continuar exponiendo en toda su extensión este error en el que había incurrido. En realidad, gracias a esta orientación de su pensamiento, lo vio todo con claridad en un instante:

—¡He pensado demasiado en él!

La señora Assingham pudo ahora percibir perfectamente la visión que Maggie tenía de su padre, por lo que la contempló animada de renovada curiosidad. En este sentido, podía mentir sin riesgo alguno. Fue como si hubiera ampliado un poco aquella rendija por la que recibía la luz. Ahora dijo:

—¡Su padre tenía fe, una fe muy hermosa, en Charlotte!

—Sí, y yo fui quien le indujo a tener fe en ella. En aquel entonces no quería que llegara a tener tanta fe en ella, porque no tenía idea de lo que se avecinaba. ¡Pero yo fue quien le induje a tener fe!

La señora Assingham insistió:

—¡Y qué fe tan hermosa!

Sin embargo, Maggie ahora contemplaba aquel asunto según su propia visión, con lo cual adquiría unos visos muy diferentes.

—Y fue él quien consiguió que ella creyera que era perfectamente posible.

La señora Assingham, dubitativa, preguntó:

—¿Fue el Príncipe quien lo consiguió?

Maggie la miró con fijeza. Se había referido a su padre. Pero las palabras de Fanny le hicieron abrir los ojos:

—Los dos lo consiguieron. Si no hubieran intervenido los dos, Charlotte no lo hubiera estimado posible.

—Sin embargo, la buena fe de Americo era perfecta.

Después de esta declaración, la señora Assingham añadió:

—Y además, de nada se podía acusar a su padre.

Esta declaración dejó a Maggie parada durante unos instantes, después de los cuales dijo:

—De nada, salvo quizá de estar al tanto de que ella lo sabía.

—¿«Sabía»?

—Que él lo hacía por mí en gran parte.

De repente Maggie preguntó a su amiga:

—¿Hasta qué punto cree que estaba al tanto de que ella lo sabía?

—¡Ah…! ¿Quién puede decir lo que pasa entre dos personas que sostienen una relación de esta naturaleza? Lo único de lo que estoy segura es que fue generoso.

Esbozó una concluyente sonrisa, y remató sus palabras con las siguientes:

—Sin duda alguna, sabía cuanto le convenía saber.

—Y cuanto a ella le convenía que supiera.

Ahora Fanny declaró:

—Efectivamente, cuanto a ella le convenía que supiera. De todas maneras, lo importante es que, fuera lo que fuese lo que supiera, con ello siempre demostró su buena fe.

Maggie siguió mirándola en silencio y ella ecuánimemente esperó la próxima reacción de la Princesa.

—Lo importante, en este caso, ¿no será que la buena fe de mi padre seguramente consistió en tener fe en que Charlotte mostraría en mi bienestar casi tanto interés como él mismo?

—Su padre reconoció y aceptó la larga amistad entre ustedes dos. Pero no basó en ella egoísmo alguno.

Después de una consideración todavía más profunda, Maggie aclaró:

—Efectivamente, excluyó el egoísmo de Charlotte casi en la misma medida que excluyó el suyo.

—Opino igual.

—Muy bien, si mi padre carecía de egoísmo, posiblemente invitó a Charlotte, o esperó de ella que tuviera tan poco egoísmo como él. Y ella bien pudo haberse dado cuenta desde entonces.

Con expresión de no haber comprendido nada, la señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿«Desde entonces»?

—Y él quizás haya comprendido que ella se ha dado cuenta.

Maggie explicó estas palabras:

—Que Charlotte se ha dado cuenta, después de su matrimonio, de lo mucho que él le pedía, o sea de que le pedía más de lo que ella creía al principio. Y mi padre quizá, por fin, se haya percatado de lo mucho que sus exigencias a la larga la han afectado.

—Muchas son las cosas que su padre puede haber hecho, pero hay una que ciertamente no ha hecho. Jamás habrá insinuado siquiera que esperaba que Charlotte diera la cuarta parte de lo que ésta suponía que él iba a dar.

—A menudo me he preguntado qué era, en realidad, lo que Charlotte suponía. Ésta es una de las cosas que nunca me ha dicho.

—En este caso, como también es una de las cosas que nunca me ha dicho, probablemente jamás llegaremos a saberlo, y podemos considerar que es asunto que no nos concierne. Son muchas las cosas que nunca sabremos.

Maggie reflexionó largamente y dijo:

—Nunca.

Su amiga prosiguió:

—Hay otras cosas que están ahí, ante nuestra vista y, sea cual fuere la dificultad con que nos tropecemos, son suficientes ahora para nosotros. Su padre se ha portado de manera extraordinaria.

Durante unos instantes pareció que Maggie anduviera un tanto perdida, como a tientas, entre sus pensamientos; pero se apresuró a adherirse a la manifestación de la señora Assingham:

—Extraordinaria.

Fanny Assingham dijo:

—Magnífica.

Maggie también se aferró a esto:

—Magnífica.

—Hará cuanto sea preciso hacer. La tarea que asumió en beneficio de usted la proseguirá hasta el final. No la emprendió con la intención de interrumpirla. ¿En qué ocasión ha fracasado su padre siendo, como es, sereno, paciente y exquisito? En toda su vida, jamás aceptó el fracaso, y no lo hará en esta ocasión.

—¡Ah, en esta ocasión…!

Maggie se había expresado con voz llorosa reveladora de que, repentinamente, volvía a recordar lo ocurrido. Añadió:

—En realidad, entre una cosa y otra, ni siquiera sé si mi padre está al tanto de lo que ocurre, pero tampoco sé si realmente no lo está.

—Si no lo sabe, tanto mejor, y más vale no decírselo.

—¿Quiere decir que debemos prescindir de él?

Fanny Assingham precisó:

—De ella. Dejar que sea él quien se encargue de ella.

Maggie le dirigió una tenebrosa mirada, y dijo:

—¿Quiere usted decir que debemos dejarle en manos de su esposa, después de lo ocurrido?

—Después de todo. ¿Acaso no están ahora íntimamente unidos?

—¿«Íntimamente»? ¿Cómo voy a saberlo?

Pero Fanny siguió en la brecha:

—¿Acaso usted y su marido no lo están, a pesar de todo?

Los ojos de Maggie se dilataron todavía más, aunque pareciera imposible:

—¡Esto habría que verlo!

—Si no lo están, ¿qué se ha hecho de su fe?

—¿En mi marido?

La señora Assingham dudó, aunque sólo por un instante, y dijo:

—En su padre, que viene a ser lo mismo. Todo se basa en esto.

—¿En su ignorancia?

Fanny también paró este golpe:

—En cuanto pueda ofrecerle. Acéptelo.

Maggie la miró pasmada:

—¿Que lo acepte?

La señora Assingham alzó la cabeza:

—Y muéstrese agradecida.

Después de decir estas palabras, guardó silencio, dejando que la Princesa le mirase. Luego le dijo:

—¿Es que no lo ve?

Por fin Maggie repuso:

—Sí lo veo.

—Pues asunto terminado.

Pero Maggie dio media vuelta sobre sí misma y se acercó a la ventana como si quisiera ocultar algo que expresaba su cara. Quedó allí con la vista en la calle, mientras la señora Assingham volvía a centrar su atención en el objeto que tantas complicaciones había causado; allí estaba en la repisa de la chimenea, y ante él experimentaba contradictorios sentimientos, extrañamente intensos, cosa rara incluso teniendo en cuenta su manera de ser, su renovada curiosidad y su renovada protesta. Se acercó al objeto, lo examinó una vez más, y cedió a la tentación de tocarlo con las manos. Las puso en él, lo levantó y quedó sorprendida de lo que pesaba. Rara vez había tenido en las manos un objeto de oro tan sólido. La impresión que le causó la indujo a expresarse con más franqueza, diciéndole a Maggie:

—La verdad es que no creo en este objeto.

Maggie dio media vuelta, la miró y dijo:

—¿Que no cree en él? Creerá cuando le cuente la verdad.

—No me cuente nada. No quiero saberlo.

La señora Assingham sostenía la copa en la mano de manera que suscitó la atención de Maggie, quien se percató de la excitada intriga con que miraba la copa. Esto tuvo la virtud, aunque fuera extraño, de revelarle a Maggie que Fanny Assingham, llevada por la libertad que se había concedido, había adquirido expresión intencionada, y esta expresión patente en sus ojos quedó acentuada cuando Maggie le dirigió una frase de advertencia:

—El objeto es valioso, pero tiene una tara. Según me han dicho está agrietado.

—¿Agrietado? ¿El oro?

—No es oro.

Dichas estas palabras Maggie sonrió, lo cual no dejó de ser extraño, y añadió:

—En esto radica todo.

—¿Qué es, pues?

—Vidrio y, además, agrietado bajo la capa dorada.

—¿Vidrio? ¿Con lo que pesa?

—Bueno, en realidad es cristal, y en otros tiempos fue un objeto muy valioso. ¿Qué le parece?

Maggie se había alejado de la ventana, de una de las tres ventanas por las que se veía desde la amplia estancia, situada en un ventajoso punto de la parte trasera de la casa, el cielo de poniente, y por las que penetraba la luz de la atardecida. La señora Assingham, en posesión de la copa y sabiendo que tenía una tara, se acercaba a otra ventana para aprovechar la luz que menguaba lentamente. Toqueteaba la singular pieza, la sopesaba, la miraba por todos los lados; teniendo conciencia cada vez más clara de un irresistible impulso nacido en su interior, preguntó:

—¿Una grieta? En ese caso, su idea también tiene una grieta.

Maggie, que ahora se encontraba un tanto alejada de la señora Assingham, esperó un poco antes de

contestar.

—Si esa idea a que se acaba de referir es el conocimiento de que…

Pero, Fanny, con decisión, la interrumpió:

—Sólo hay un conocimiento que nos concierna, sólo hay un hecho que nos importe.

—¿Cuál?

—El hecho de que su marido jamás, jamás, jamás…

Pero la misma gravedad de esta afirmación la indujo a interrumpir la frase mientras dirigía la vista a su amiga, un tanto alejada de ella. Maggie dijo:

—¿Jamás qué?

—Jamás ha sentido por usted un interés tan grande como el que ahora siente. Ni siquiera la mitad. ¿Es que no se da cuenta?

Maggie, después de pensar, repuso:

—Bueno, creo que ya le he dicho qué es lo que me induce a pensar lo que pienso. Precisamente es el hecho de que mi marido haya olvidado hoy incluso sus modales, que se haya mantenido lejos de mí, que no haya venido.

Maggie movió la cabeza como si se negara a aceptar que le dorasen la píldora, y añadió:

—Y se debe a este objeto.

—¡Muy bien! Pues si a ese objeto se debe…

Y Fanny Assingham, que había estado lanzando miradas a su alrededor, y había sentido con toda claridad una inspiración, levantó la copa con las dos manos, la levantó por encima de su cabeza, y bajo la copa dorada, solemnemente, sonrió a la Princesa para indicarle cuáles eran sus intenciones. Durante unos instantes, dueña de su pensamiento y de sus actos, Fanny sostuvo el precioso recipiente; a continuación, después de haber medido el espacio en que el brillante suelo estaba despejado, allí a sus pies, junto a la ventana, arrojó decididamente la copa al suelo, en donde Fanny tuvo la agradable emoción de verla rota después de la violencia del choque. El esfuerzo había sonrojado a Fanny, de la misma manera que la emoción del espectáculo había ruborizado a Maggie; estos intensos reflejos en sus rostros fueron la comunicación que hubo entre las dos durante un minuto o más. Después la señora Assingham dijo:

—Fuera cual fuese el significado que le diera, y conste que ahora no quiero saberlo, ha dejado de existir.

—¿Y se puede saber, querida, qué significado tenía?

Esta voz, como surgida al impulso de un resorte, se oyó como si fuera el primer efecto de las palabras pronunciadas por Fanny. Se estrelló contra la absorción de las dos mujeres, con una sequedad casi igual a la del cristal al chocar y romperse, ya que el Príncipe había abierto la puerta sin que ellas se dieran cuenta. Además, al parecer, el Príncipe había tenido tiempo de ver el final del acto de Fanny Assingham. La mirada del Príncipe, a través del ancho espacio que le permitía una visión sin obstáculos, se había fijado en los relucientes pedazos desparramados a los pies de la señora. Él había dirigido la pregunta a su esposa, pero inmediatamente después de formularla trasladó su mirada a los ojos de la visitante, cuya mirada penetrante, a su vez, sostuvo la del Príncipe de una manera que ninguno de los dos había sido capaz de hacer, desde aquella hora que el Príncipe pasó en la casa de Cadogan Place, poco antes de su matrimonio, en la tarde de la reaparición de Charlotte. De nuevo algo volvía a ser posible para aquellos dos comunicantes en la intensidad de la presión ejercida recíprocamente, algo que reanudaba la pasada historia, y que bien podía ser una redención de las promesas intercambiadas en aquel entonces. El rápido intercambio de reprimida petición y encubierta respuesta duró lo bastante como para producir más de un resultado, duró lo bastante como para que la señora Assingham tomara debida medida de la hazaña de rápido autodescubrimiento; en consecuencia, posiblemente de reconocimiento todavía más inmediato, acompañando la visión de Americo así como su valoración de la prueba a la que la señora Assingham había dado —tai admirablemente, como pensó mientras miraba al Príncipe— aquel inspirado tratamiento. Miraba y miraba al Príncipe, y eran muchas las cosas que quería decir allí mismo. Pero Maggie también miraba y, además, miraba a los dos, por lo que para la mayor de las dos mujeres aquellas cosas quedaron con notable rapidez reducidas a una. Fanny Assingham no contestó a la pregunta del Príncipe demasiado tarde, ya que aún estaba flotando en el aire. La señora Assingham, disponiéndose a irse, dejando la copa dorada rota en pedazos en el suelo, se limitó a remitir al Príncipe a su esposa. Los vería después. Pronto volverían a reunirse y, entre tanto, en lo referente al significado de las palabras de Maggie —dijo la señora Assingham, al girar sobre sí misma, junto a la puerta—, la propia Maggie, sin duda alguna, estaba ahora preparada para revelárselo al Príncipe.

Capítulo XXXIV

Sin embargo Maggie, a solas con su marido, nada dijo por el momento. Lo único que sentía en aquellos instantes era el fuerte y penetrante deseo de no volver a ver su rostro hasta haber tenido tiempo de componer su expresión. Maggie lo había visto durante el tiempo suficiente para aclarar las ideas y determinar lo que haría a continuación, lo había visto en la mirada de sorpresa que siguió a su entrada. En aquel instante, supo cuán experta había llegado a ser en juzgar con rapidez aquella expresión, que recordaba indeleble a efectos de referencia, y que había iluminado con súbita luz su alma turbada la noche en que el Príncipe regresó tarde de su visita a Matcham. La expresión del rostro del Príncipe, en aquella ocasión, a pesar de lo breves que fueron los instantes que duró, le dio la medida de las posibilidades de su expresión y quizá una de las más importantes le quedó patente el tiempo preciso para ser reconocida, antes de que se retirara la señora Assingham. Lo que Maggie había reconocido en la expresión de su esposo era el conocimiento de éste: el resultado de haber sido obligado por el impulso del comportamiento de su visitante, así como por el eco todavía no extinguido de sus palabras, a tener en cuenta los flagrantes indicios del accidente, o incidente, del que de modo imprevisto había sido testigo. Nada extraño hubo en que no estimara que los hechos presenciados estaban representados por los tres fragmentos de un objeto evidentemente valioso que estaban en el suelo y que, incluso mediando la anchura de la estancia, el distanciamiento que de ellos había mantenido el Príncipe le recordaban, de manera inconfundible aunque confusa, algo conocido, una imagen no olvidada. Fue una fuerte impresión, fue un dolor, como si la violencia de Fanny hubiera sido violencia redoblada y de efectos superiores a la intención con que se ejerció, una violencia que atraía la sangre caliente de la misma manera que la atrae un golpe en la boca. A Maggie le constaba, en el momento en que apartó la vista de la cara de su marido, que ella no deseaba que él experimentara aquel dolor. Lo que quería era su propia y sencilla certidumbre, y no aquella roja marca de condena llameando en la belleza de su esposo. Lo que más le hubiera gustado, sería poder ir con los ojos vendados. Y si ahora se tratara de tener que decir lo que Maggie tuviera que decir, y de escuchar lo que el Príncipe dijera, cuanta más fuera la oscuridad que envolviera lo uno y lo otro, mejor.

En silencio, Maggie se acercó al lugar en que su amiga —jamás tan visiblemente amiga suya, en su intención, como en aquel momento— había dado muestras de tan pasmosa energía, y allí, bajo la mirada de Americo, recogió los relucientes fragmentos. Deslumbrantemente ataviada y enjoyada, con el rumor de suntuosos tejidos, en humilde actitud rindió prestamente tributo al orden, aunque se dio cuenta de que sólo podía coger dos fragmentos a la vez. Llevó los dos fragmentos a la repisa de la chimenea, al sitio visible en que había estado la copa antes de que Fanny la cogiera; después de dejarlos cuidadosamente allí, volvió al lugar del estropicio para coger el que quedaba, o sea el sólido pie separado del cuerpo. Con este fragmento en la mano, regresó junto a la repisa, colocándolo cuidadosamente en el centro, dedicándose luego, durante algún tiempo, a intentar encajar los otros fragmentos entre sí. La grieta anteriormente existente había sido la causa de que el filo de los fragmentos fuera tan limpio y cortante que si hubieran podido mantenerlos unidos, la copa, contemplada a unos pasos de distancia, hubiera parecido íntegra. Pero, como es natural, nada había para mantener unidos los fragmentos, salvo las manos de Maggie, y durante los breves momentos que cumplieron tal cometido, no le quedó más remedio que dejar las dos porciones, casi iguales, de la copa al lado del pie, con lo que quedaron ante la vista de su marido. Maggie había actuado en

silencio, como si con sus actos quisiera causar una determinada impresión, pero le pareció que esta impresión buscada tardaba en producirse mucho más de lo que jamás había tardado a consecuencia de un acto tan breve. Americo también se abstuvo de hablar, pero su silencio quedaba cubierto con la pátina de la advertencia que sin duda Maggie deseaba que su marido diera por recibida. Parecía que la manera de actuar de Maggie a él le hiciera guardar silencio mientras la observaba. El Príncipe no podía albergar duda alguna al respecto. Maggie lo sabía y su copa quebrada constituía la prueba de que lo sabía, pero no deseaba que su esposo malgastara palabras. Americo forzosamente tendría que pensar, y Maggie lo sabía, y lo único que quería por el momento era que estuviera al tanto. Maggie había estimado que su marido había estado preocupado durante todo el día o, por lo menos, oscura e instintivamente angustiado, por lo que Maggie había comunicado a Fanny Assingham, pero se había equivocado en lo tocante a la angustia de Americo. Su temor, como síntoma patente de mantenerse alejado, había resultado, a fin de cuentas, mayor que el temor que sentía por acudir a su lado. Y había acudido, incluso a riesgo de aportar consigo el miedo, ¿y qué más necesitaba ahora Maggie además de la sensación, que se formó en el transcurso de los primeros minutos, de que realmente Americo había traído consigo el miedo, por mucho que se hubiera preparado contra el riesgo de que una palabra torpe le traicionara, y de que el miedo se hallaba ahora preso entre los dos, y de que los diversos movimientos latían envueltos por el miedo, tal como el pulso late bajo la yema del pulgar del médico?

En resumen, la sensación que Maggie experimentaba en presencia de su esposo consistía en que, a diferencia de la copa que se había roto, su razón no se había quebrado; la razón por la que había tomado una decisión, la razón por la que había llamado a su amiga, la razón por la que había dispuesto así la habitación para que su marido la viera de aquella manera; y se trataba de una sola razón que ejercía sobre ella el enérgico dominio de su menuda persona; en cambio las consecuencias del acto de Fanny, y de la visión que de este acto tuvo el Príncipe no le afectaban a ella de forma absoluta y directa sino a Americo, el cual debía comprender y aceptar. De ahí que Maggie deseara dejar pasar el tiempo para que lo utilizara Americo; durante un largo período, durante horas y horas, le parecía haber vivido una eternidad, y en la eternidad seguiría viviendo. Maggie quería decir a Americo: «Tómate tiempo, tómate tiempo, toma cuanto tiempo necesites, haz lo preciso para sufrir lo menos posible o para quedar lo menos deformado y desfigurado que quepa. Pero debes saber que lo sé, y decídete, sobre esta base, como más te convenga. Espera —poco tendrás que esperar— hasta el momento en que de nuevo puedas consultar con Charlotte, y así decidirás mucho mejor, y será más fácil para nosotros dos. Sobre todo no me mostréis, hasta que lo hayáis dominado a la perfección, el terrible daño, las devastaciones de la desorientación y la vergüenza causadas por mis actos, en vuestra personal serenidad, en vuestra incomparable superioridad». Cuando Maggie hubo situado de nuevo, ordenadamente, sus pequeños objetos en la repisa de la chimenea, le faltó muy poco para volverse hacia su esposo y formularle esta petición. Pero comprendía con toda lucidez, en todo instante, que la ocasión de hacerlo estaba pasando, que cenaban fuera de casa, que él aún no se había vestido para la cena, y que ella, a pesar de haberse ya vestido, con toda probabilidad tenía la cara tan horriblemente roja, y la agitación la había dejado tan desarreglada en tantos aspectos, que teniendo en cuenta a la gente que encontrarían en la cena del embajador, y los posibles comentarios, necesitaba retocar sus apariencias externas ante el espejo.

Entretanto, Americo pudo evidentemente sacar el máximo provecho de aquella invitación a esperar que Maggie le había formulado, expresada indirectamente por la patente solemnidad con que se encargó de recoger los pedazos de la copa, es decir, a esperar hasta que ella hablara como la señora Assingham había prometido que hablaría. Sin embargo, esta demora puso a prueba la presencia de ánimo de Maggie, aunque no fue esta tensión lo que la llevó a hablar. Por mucho que momentáneamente mantuviera la mirada apartada de su marido, no pudo evitar tener creciente e irreprimible conciencia de la tensión que la mente de su marido experimentaba. Incluso hubo unos instantes, cuando estuvo vuelta de espaldas a él, en los que una vez más sintió la extrañeza de su deseo de evitarle el mal trago, una extrañeza que ya había rozado cincuenta veces a Maggie en lo más hondo de su preocupación, como el ala de un pájaro que ciegamente se sitúa por un instante sobre el brocal de un pozo, y oscurece con su pasajero movimiento el disco del cielo. Era extraordinaria la calidad de esa percepción de la ofensa de que había sido objeto, causa de que su total impresión antes se reblandeciera que se endureciera; y tanto más extraordinaria era cuanto más tenía que reconocerla, pues el sentirse por fin segura, el saberse conocedora de todo, el tener todas las abominaciones tan claramente ante la vista, de manera que nada más cabía añadir, venía a representar que por el mero hecho de estar con él allí, en silencio, Maggie sentía en su interior el brusco antagonismo entre el

convencimiento y la actuación. Habían comenzado a estar allí sorprendentemente en comunicación. Es decir, el convencimiento no se había movido ni media pulgada y había asentado más y más firmemente sus pies en el suelo, pero la actuación había comenzado a flotar en el aire, como si fuera una forma más grande aunque más ligera, más manejable, excitada por su misma capacidad de alejarse del suelo.

La actuación sería libre, sería independiente, y emprendería —¿realmente?— una superior y prodigiosa aventura por su cuenta. Lo que podía condenar la actuación —y valga la expresión— a la responsabilidad de la libertad —y esto se insinuaba, incluso ahora, en la mente de Maggie— era la posibilidad, creciente a medida que los instantes transcurrían, de que su marido sintiera en aquel asunto, globalmente considerado, una nueva necesidad de ella, una necesidad que verdaderamente iba naciendo al paso de los segundos. A Maggie le pareció realmente tan nuevo que comprendió que Americo no tendría nada con que compararla, y de una forma absoluta, por esta circunstancia, la necesitaría por vez primera en el curso de toda su recíproca relación. No, Americo se había servido de ella, incluso había gozado en exceso de ella, pero no había habido un precedente de necesidad probada por su parte, que Maggie tan rápidamente aprehendía ahora. Además, la inmensa ventaja de esta concreta clave consistía en que ahora Maggie no tendría que disponer, alterar, falsear nada, únicamente debía ser constantemente sencilla y directa. Muy concentrada la atención, se preguntó, mientras daba aún la espalda a Americo, cuál sería el método ideal. Se le ocurrió al instante el que, volviéndose hacia él, puso en práctica:

—Fanny Assingham la rompió, pues sabía que tenía una grieta y que podía romperla empleando al efecto la fuerza precisa. Cuando se lo dije, Fanny pensó que esto era lo mejor que podía hacerse con la copa. Bueno, esto lo pensó ella, aunque no era ésta mi idea, pero lo hizo antes de que yo pudiera darme cuenta.

Maggie añadió:

—Yo, al contrario, la había puesto aquí, en sitio destacado, para que la vieras.

Él estaba de pie, con las manos en los bolsillos del pantalón, fija la vista en los trozos sobre la repisa de la chimenea; Maggie ya podía sentirse aliviada al ver que Americo aceptaba la oportunidad que ella le ofrecía de ponderar los efectos de la violencia de su amiga, de modo que cada segundo de reflexión y de demora tenía la ventaja, desde el punto de vista de su esposo, de contar el doble para él. En su fuero interno y con suma intensidad ella había comprendido que vislumbrando aquella preciosa verdad le ayudaría a Americo, le ayudaría a ayudarse a sí mismo, con lo que le ayudaría a que él la ayudara a ella. ¿Acaso no había penetrado ya lo suficientemente en el laberinto de su esposo, en su compañía? ¿Acaso no estaba en trance de colocarse allí en su beneficio, en su mismísimo centro, en su cogollo, desde donde con claro sentido de la orientación, y mediante un instinto exclusivamente propio, podría guiarle con seguridad para salir de allí? De esta manera, sin duda, ofrecía a Americo una clase de ayuda que no hubiera sido posible imaginar de antemano, y que además exigía —¡por cierto!— un detenido examen antes de que se pudiera creer en tal ayuda, y de que se pudiera declarar que en ella no había traición. Tenía la impresión de contemplarlo mientras la oía decir lo siguiente, aunque las palabras que pronunció fueron muy distintas: «Sí, contempla, contempla la verdad que aún queda en esta prueba rota, como los todavía más notables indicios de que no soy tan tonta como tú imaginabas. Contempla la posibilidad de que, habida cuenta de que soy diferente, quizás haya todavía en nuestra situación algo que puedas conseguir, si es que eres capaz de colaborar conmigo para conseguirlo. Desde luego, considera, como debes considerar, la cuestión de aquello a lo que tendrás que renunciar, considera el precio que tendrás que pagar, y con quién tendrás que pagarlo, para poder gozar de alguna ventaja; de todas maneras, ten en cuenta que hay algo para ti si no pierdes ciegamente la oportunidad de lograrlo». Americo no se acercó a los acusadores pedazos de la copa, pero los contemplaba desde el lugar en que se había quedado de pie, poco después de entrar, con una expresión de reconocimiento y con una intensidad sólo muy escasamente inferior a la que hubiera sido preciso disimular, todo lo cual venía a ser para ella un proceso discernible. Entretanto, las palabras pronunciadas por Maggie fueron notablemente diferentes de las que hubiera podido insertar entre las líneas de las que ya había dicho:

—Es la copa dorada que viste en la tiendecilla del anticuario de Bloomsbury hace ya tiempo cuanto fuiste con Charlotte y pasaste sin que yo lo supiera aquellas horas con ella uno o dos días antes de nuestro matrimonio. A los dos os mostraron la copa dorada, pero tú no la quisiste, la dejaste para mí; y la encontré por extraordinaria casualidad, debido a que entré en la misma tienda el lunes pasado al regresar a pie a casa, paseando sin rumbo para comprar alguna pequeña antigualla que regalar a papá en el día de su cumpleaños, después de haber visitado el Museo en donde había quedado citada con el señor Crichton, tal

como te dije. Me mostraron la copa, quedé impresionada por ella y la adquirí, sin saber nada a la sazón. Lo que ahora sé lo supe luego, lo he sabido esta tarde, hace dos horas; como es natural me causó una fuerte impresión. Y aquí la tienes, la tienes en tres fragmentos. Puedes tocarlos, no temas, si quieres tener la seguridad de que realmente es el objeto que visteis Charlotte y tú juntos. El hecho de que se haya partido constituye una diferencia nefasta para su belleza, para su valor artístico, pero para nada más. Su otro valor sigue exactamente igual; con ello quiero decir el valor de haber revelado una verdad tan grande referente a ti. En consecuencia, muy poco me importa ahora el destino de estos fragmentos, aunque quizá tú, después de pensar en ello, les encuentres buen uso.

Maggie remató estas palabras con las siguientes:

—En este caso, sin dificultad podemos llevarnos los pedazos a Fawns.

Para Maggie fue maravilloso advertir, una vez recorrido este desfiladero, que realmente ya había conseguido algo que comenzaba a salir de aquel estrecho ámbito y tenía ante sí un panorama no tan cerrado. Es decir, había hecho en beneficio de Americo lo que sus intuiciones le habían invitado a hacer; había sentado una base que no era meramente momentánea en la que su esposo podía reunirse con ella. Cuando por fin él la miró después de volver un poco la cabeza a un lado, fue esto lo último que destelló en su mirada; pero a pesar de todo fue visible su preocupación casi como un interrogante en sus ojos, por lo que, antes de que Americo hablara, hubo entre los dos una especie de comunicación moral sin precedentes, presidida por la superior lucidez de Maggie. Sin embargo, no se puede decir que, cuando por fin habló, el tenor de sus palabras no resultara realmente portentoso:

—¿Y qué tiene que ver Fanny en todo esto?

Poco faltó para que Maggie, en su reprimido dolor, esbozara una sonrisa. La pregunta le causó la impresión de que dejaba íntegramente el asunto en sus manos. Y esto le permitió expresarse de forma más directa todavía:

—Pues Fanny tiene que ver con esto porque inmediatamente le pedí que viniera y Fanny vino inmediatamente. Era la primera persona a quien yo quería ver, porque sabía que ella lo sabía. Quiero decir que sabía más acerca de lo que yo me había enterado, de lo que yo podría llegar a saber por mí misma. Por mí misma había averiguado cuanto había podido; sí, esto es algo que también he querido hacer, pero a pesar de todo no he llegado muy lejos; Fanny me ha sido realmente de gran ayuda, pero no de tanta como ella hubiese querido; no me ha supuesto tanta ayuda, a pesar de su bondad, como ella hubiera querido. Fanny ha hecho cuanto ha podido en tu beneficio, nunca lo olvides, y ha conseguido que yo avance inconmensurablemente más de lo que hubiera avanzado sola. Fanny ha ganado tiempo en mi beneficio, y este tiempo, estos tres meses, ¿no lo ves?, lo ha sido todo.

Maggie había dicho intencionadamente «¿no lo ves?», pero al instante pudo comprobar que estas palabras habían producido el efecto deseado, por cuanto el Príncipe preguntó:

—¿«Estos tres meses»?

—A contar desde la noche en que tan tardíamente regresaste de Matcham. A contar desde las horas que pasaste con Charlotte en Gloucester con tu visita a la catedral, que no olvidaste contarme con gran detalle. Sí, entonces fue cuando comencé a estar segura. Anteriormente tenía dudas.

Después de una pausa, aclaró:

—Segura de que tenías tú, de que habías tenido durante largo tiempo, dos relaciones con Charlotte.

Americo la miró un tanto desorientado, intentando comprender:

—¿«Dos»…?

Algo hubo en el tono con que pronunció esta palabra que le dio un sentido o una ambigüedad casi de estupidez, con lo que Maggie se dio cuenta, con fulminante rapidez, de que la ineludible falta de felicidad, parte ridícula incluso en un hombre sumamente inteligente, quizá constituyera en consecuencia, la esencia de la pena correspondiente a su comportamiento. Maggie dijo:

—¡Hubieras podido tener cincuenta, hubieras podido tener cincuenta veces la misma relación con ella! Hablo del número de clases de relaciones, número que importa muy poco, dado que no hubo una sola clase, como mi padre y yo suponíamos.

Guardó silencio unos instantes y prosiguió:

—Una clase estaba ahí ante nosotros, la dimos por sabida, tal como pudiste comprobar, y la aceptamos. Jamás pensamos que hubiera otra escondida. Pero después de la noche a que me he referido, me di cuenta de que había algo más. Como he dicho, anteriormente tenía mis ideas al respecto, lo cual tú ni siquiera llegaste a soñar. Pero, a partir del momento al que me refiero, tuve más en qué pensar, y vosotros dos, tú y

ella, tuvisteis vaga e inquieta conciencia del cambio. Sin embargo, ha sido durante las últimas horas cuando he podido ver con mayor claridad la situación en que nos encontramos. He comunicado mis dudas a Fanny Assingham, y he querido que supiera mi certeza, a la que he llegado, y quiero que lo sepas, sin que Fanny haya contribuido en nada.

A continuación observó:

—Fanny Assingham te defiende.

Americo le había prestado toda su atención, y teniendo una vez más la impresión de que su marido esperaba de ella que le diera tiempo, tiempo y solo tiempo, podía con relativa facilidad imaginar, no sin cierta extrañeza, que le gustaba que hablara, le gustaba incluso a costa de perderlo todo, de perder cuanto no fuera tiempo. Él guardó silencio durante un minuto, como si esperase cosas peores todavía, como si quisiera que Maggie le dijera cuanto tuviera que decir, le dijera hechos concretos, le dijera realidad que cupiera expresar con más precisión, a fin de que también él, como era su derecho, supiera cuál era la situación en que se hallaba. Lo que más le agitaba mientras seguía en el rostro de Maggie el claro curso de su parlamento, forzosamente tuvo que ser el impulso de referirse, como si lo tomara en sus manos, a algo que Maggie había puesto ante él pero que él todavía temía tocar directamente. Americo quería aclararlo, pero no podía tocarlo por razones que ya había averiguado, y la molestia que esta privación le causaba la veía Maggie como un ansia en los ojos de su esposo, revelada con el destello de la fiebre, del escalofrío difícilmente tolerable, propio del reconocimiento concreto. Tenía el temor de que Maggie hablara, más o menos, en representación de su padre también, y sus ojos parecían empeñados en el intento de hipnotizarla a fin de que le diera la respuesta a la pregunta que tenía en la mente sin necesidad de formularla. «¿Tenía tu padre también tus ideas, y tiene ahora, juntamente contigo, más cosas en las que pensar?» Éstas eran las palabras que no debía pronunciar, y que Maggie, ciertamente, no le facilitaría la tarea de callar. Con la más penetrante emoción ella se daba cuenta de que ahora lo tenía rígido y atado, y conscientemente se proponía seguir teniéndolo en tal estado aunque se percataba de la dolorosa lástima que ello le inspiraba. Resultaba imposible mencionar a su padre dentro de aquel sentimiento de ansiedad, de compunción, sin que equivaliera a delatar a Charlotte.

De una forma perceptible, palpable, visible, Americo se abstenía, se apartaba como si se tratara de un abismo súbitamente percibido, pero que había mediado entre los dos, juntamente con muchas otras cosas no calculadas. Y esta historia de su confianza se alzaba ante Maggie. Habían construido sólidamente, habían elevado a gran altura —basándose en las apariencias— su convicción de que, gracias a las muchas virtudes innatas que adornaban a Maggie, ésta consideraría, siempre noblemente y hasta el final, que estaba por encima de dichas apariencias. De todas maneras, Americo experimentaba la sensación de tener que evitar determinada fealdad, de estar obligado a tener en cuenta una concreta dificultad, para lo cual se encontraba tan poco preparado como si él hubiera sido, igual que su esposa, una persona lamentablemente sencilla. Sin embargo, y a pesar de ser lamentablemente sencilla, Maggie comprendía además, por sí misma, que fuera lo que fuese lo que él tuviera que aceptar de ella —por ser mujer dotada de bella libertad—, jamás podría, a cualquier propósito útil a sus fines, mencionar a Charlotte. En su calidad de esposa del suegro de Americo la señora Verver se alzaba allí entre los dos, por el momento revestida de augusta y prohibitiva forma, de manera que protegerla, defenderla, dar explicaciones acerca de ella equivalía, por lo menos, a ponerla en tela de juicio, lo cual representaría, al mismo tiempo, poner en tela de juicio a su marido. Ésta era precisamente la puerta que Maggie no le abriría, por lo que al pensar en todo lo anterior se preguntó si su marido, de tal manera advertido y acosado, quizá no se retorcía de dolor. En el caso de dar respuesta afirmativa a semejante hipótesis, hay que decir que Americo se retorció de dolor unos cuantos segundos después: éste fue el tiempo que tardó en determinar lo que podía, y lo que no podía hacer.

—Al parecer, sacas inmensas conclusiones de realidades muy pequeñas. ¿En justicia no consideras que atacas, triunfas o como quieras llamarlo, quizá con excesiva facilidad, a pesar de que confieso paladinamente que recuerdo tu copa rota? Ahora confieso con franqueza la realidad de aquella ocasión, así como no haber deseado hablarte de ella entonces. Acordamos pasar dos o tres horas juntos, y ello realmente ocurrió en vísperas de tu casamiento, como tú dices. Pero en realidad ocurrió también en vísperas de mi casamiento, lo cual es lo que más importa. En tan tardío momento me pidieron hallara para ti un modesto regalo de bodas; me propusieron una búsqueda, la búsqueda de algo digno para ti, y posiblemente me propusieron también esta búsqueda desde otros puntos de vista, desde los cuales yo podía ser de utilidad. Como es natural, era preciso mantenerlo en secreto ante ti, debido a que lo hacíamos por ti. Salimos juntos y buscamos, fuimos de un lado para otro, como a la sazón dijimos, anduvimos de caza. Entonces, libremente

lo reconozco, encontramos esta copa de cristal, de la cual puedo decir bajo palabra de honor que es una lástima a mi juicio que haya recibido semejante trato en manos de Fanny Assingham, por buenos que fueran sus motivos.

Americo había hablado manteniendo las manos en los bolsillos. Una vez más fijó la vista, aunque ahora con mayor complacencia, en los restos del precioso recipiente, y Maggie pudo percibir cómo exhalaba un largo y profundo suspiro de relativo alivio en la conquistada serenidad gracias a su explicación. Después de todo lo ocurrido, y bajo su influjo, representaba en cierta manera un consuelo para él hablar al fin con su esposa y daba la impresión de estar empeñado en demostrarse a sí mismo que realmente podía hacerlo.

—Descubrimos una tiendecilla en Bloomsbury. Creo que todavía podría llegar a ella. Recuerdo que el tendero comprendía el italiano. Ansiaba desprenderse de esa copa. Pero no creí en ella y no la compramos.

Maggie había escuchado con un interés que revestía todas la apariencias del candor. Dijo:

—La dejasteis para mí. ¿Y qué comprasteis?

Americo la miró. Primero como si intentara recordar; luego, como si se hubiera esforzado en olvidar.

—Nada, me parece, en aquella tienda.

—Pero ¿qué comprasteis en otra tienda, en cualquier sitio? ¿Qué regalo de bodas me ofrecisteis, pues éste era vuestro propósito y finalidad?

El Príncipe siguió meditando, muy noblemente, como si se interrogara a sí mismo al respecto. Dijo:

—¿Nada te regalamos?

Maggie esperó un poco. Ahora llevaba ya algún tiempo manteniendo la vista fija en Americo; pero, al escuchar estas palabras, apartó la vista de su marido, y fue a fijarla en los pedazos que reposaban en la repisa de la chimenea.

—Sí, a fin de cuentas resulta que vosotros dos me habéis proporcionado esa copa. La iba a encontrar personalmente hace pocos días por maravillosa casualidad, la iba a encontrar en la misma tienda y me la iba a ofrecer con insistencia el mismo hombrecillo que, como tú dices, entiende el italiano. Y debes saber «que creí en ella», seguramente creí en ella de una manera instintiva, por cuanto me la quedé tan pronto como la vi.

Hizo una pausa y añadió:

—Aun cuando ignoraba, a la sazón, lo que adquiría, juntamente con la copa.

De manera visible y durante un instante, el Príncipe tuvo la deferencia de esforzarse en imaginar a qué se refería su esposa con las palabras anteriores y, después dijo:

—Estoy de acuerdo contigo en que la coincidencia es extraordinaria, una de esas casualidades que ocurren principalmente en las novelas y en las obras de teatro. Pero permíteme que te diga que no veo la importancia o la relación…

—¿De haber yo efectuado la compra que tú no hiciste?

Maggie había interpretado enseguida la intención del Príncipe; pero al mismo tiempo, con la vista fija en él, se había sumido en sus propios pensamientos, a los que seguía fiel, dijera lo que dijese su marido. Ahora, dijo:

—Lo raro, en este caso, estriba en lo que iba a llegar a representar esa tiendecilla, después de cuatro años, ya que casualidades como ésta no ocurren fácilmente en Londres.

Lúcidamente, añadió:

—Lo raro, en este caso, estriba en lo que iba a llegar a representar para mí el objeto comprado tan pronto lo tuviera en casa, valor que iba a nacer del hecho maravilloso de haber encontrado a una persona tan amiga.

Su marido, evidentemente, no podía considerar que tal hecho fuera maravilloso, lo que le indujo a preguntar:

—¿«Persona tan amiga»?

—Como el hombrecillo de la tienda. Él hizo en beneficio mío mucho más de lo que él mismo podía suponer. Estoy en deuda con él. Se interesó por mí y, al hacerlo, se acordó de tu visita a su tienda, te recordó, y me habló de ti.

Estas palabras suscitaron en el Príncipe el siguiente comentario acompañado de una escéptica sonrisa:

—Querida, si tan extraordinarios hechos se producen porque la gente se interesa por ti…

Ella le interrumpió, preguntando:

—En este caso, ¿mi vida ha de ser muy agitada? Bueno, le gusté; quiero decir que le gusté de manera muy especial. Solamente esto puede explicar que volviera a saber de ese hombre.

Después de una pausa, prosiguió:

—En realidad, hoy mismo me ha confirmado que ésta es la explicación de su comportamiento.

El Príncipe preguntó:

—¿Hoy?

Pero Maggie estaba singularmente dotada —luego se dijo a sí mismo que era como un don maravilloso que se le hubiera conferido— para guiarse por sus luces, para seguir su camino, para mantenerse dentro de su propio orden:

—Desperté su simpatía, eso es todo. Pero el milagro ha consistido en que ese hombre pudiera ofrecerme una simpatía que me fuera útil a mí.

La Princesa, después de una breve pausa, prosiguió:

—Ahí está la rareza de mi suerte; en que tuviera el impulso, en mi ignorancia, de ir precisamente a la tienda de ese hombre.

El Príncipe percibía con tanta claridad que Maggie seguía sólo el curso de sus pensamientos, que tenía la impresión de que lo único que él podía hacer, en el mejor de los casos, era mantenerse al margen y contemplar su paso. El Príncipe únicamente pudo hacer una vaga manifestación que fue como un ademán sin significado:

—No quisiera hablar mal de tus amigos y, además, todo ocurrió hace mucho tiempo. Por otra parte, en ningún momento he tenido razones para recordar el lance. Sin embargo, recuerdo que ese hombre me causó la impresión de ser un mal bicho.

Ella movió lentamente la cabeza en gesto negativo, como si, después de pensarlo, dijera que no, que no era éste el caso. Replicó:

—Para mí es un hombre amable, pues nada tenía que ganar con su actitud. En realidad, sólo podía perder. Ha venido para decirme que me ha pedido un precio excesivamente alto, un precio superior al valor real del objeto comprado. A este efecto, concurría una especial razón a la que no había hecho referencia, razón que le había inducido a meditar y a arrepentirse. Me escribió pidiéndome permiso para volver a verme, y me escribió en tales términos que le he recibido aquí esta tarde.

El Príncipe miró a su alrededor y preguntó:

—¿Aquí?

Abajo, en la salita roja. Y ese hombre, mientras esperaba, ha contemplado las escasas fotografías que hay allí y ha reconocido a dos personas. A pesar de que ocurrió hace ya tiempo, recordó la visita que le hicieron una dama y un caballero; esto le trajo a la mente otros recuerdos, lo cual ha representado para mí una revelación, puesto que ese hombre lo ha recordado todo y me lo ha contado todo. Como puedes ver, también tú le impresionaste. Pero ese hombre, a diferencia de ti, ha vuelto a pensar en aquella visita, la ha recordado. Me ha dicho que queríais haceros un regalo el uno al otro, y que este deseo no llegó a convertirse en realidad. La señora quedó prendada de la copa, pero tú tenías tus razones para negarte a recibir de ella semejante objeto, y estabas en lo cierto. Ahora el hombrecillo se ha dado cuenta, con más claridad que en cualquier momento anterior, de lo muy certera que fue tu decisión, y de lo bien que supiste adivinar que la copa tenía una grieta y de que podía romperse con gran facilidad. Yo la compré para regalarla, y el vendedor lo sabía. Eso fue lo que llegó a preocuparle, especialmente teniendo en cuenta el precio que yo había pagado.

Su relato quedó interrumpido durante un instante, pues lo iba desarrollando a leves oleadas de energía, que sucediéndose nacían y morían, lo que dio al Príncipe la oportunidad de hablar antes de que ella renovara esa fuerza. Pero la pregunta que el Príncipe formuló fue rara:

—¿Y puede saberse qué precio pagaste?

Maggie tardó un poco en contestar:

—Alto, ciertamente, habida cuenta de estos pedazos. Ahora, al contemplarlos, me doy cuenta de que me da vergüenza decirlo.

El Príncipe volvió a contemplar la copa rota, como si ya se hubiera acostumbrado al espectáculo:

—Pero ¿te devolverá el dinero, por lo menos?

—No quiero que me lo devuelva, tengo la impresión de que es un dinero bien empleado.

Dichas estas palabras, y antes de que el Príncipe pudiera comentarlas, Maggie alteró bruscamente el rumbo de sus pensamientos:

—Lo más importante, respecto al día del que hablamos, a mi parecer, es el hecho realmente notable de que a la sazón no recibiera yo regalo alguno. Si ésta era vuestra intención, no se siguió de ella ningún

resultado.

Con expresión vaga y grave, como si estuviera preocupado por lo sucedido, el Príncipe preguntó:

—¿Nada, absolutamente nada recibiste?

—Nada, salvo la disculpa de estar con las manos y los bolsillos vacíos, disculpa que me ofreció con toda franqueza, de manera simpática y conmovedora… ¡Como si a mí me importara o no recibir el regalo!

Americo escuchó estas palabras con interés, sin dar muestras de confusión:

—¡Desde luego, no te importaba!

Evidentemente, a medida que Maggie proseguía, él iba sacando mayor partido de la embarazosa situación de tener que estar callado, como si procurara expresar que necesitaba sufrir que Maggie le impusiera silencio, antes de salir juntos y mostrarse en sociedad, aunque durante un tiempo, no más prolongado que el que convenía al que normalmente se podía dedicar a un parlamento en un momento inoportuno, Americo consultó el reloj. En ningún momento se había olvidado del compromiso que tenían que cumplir. Dijo:

—En realidad, aún no he podido averiguar qué me reprochas.

—¿En todo lo que te he dicho? Pues de todo. Haberme engañado tan certeramente durante tan largo tiempo. El propósito de encontrar algo que ofrecerme, a pesar del encanto que hubiera podido tener, nada tuvo que ver entonces con el hecho de que pasarais toda una mañana juntos. Lo que realmente tuvo que ver fue que teníais que hacerlo. No podíais dejar de hacerlo desde el instante en que volvisteis a encontraros cara a cara. Y la razón radicaba en lo mucho que había habido entre vosotros dos antes…, antes de que yo me interpusiera.

Durante los últimos instantes, Americo había estado paseando por la estancia, mientras Maggie le seguía con la mirada; pero al oír estas palabras, como si quisiera reprimir todo indicio de impaciencia, volvió a quedarse quieto, y dijo:

—En momento alguno has sido tan sagrada para mí como entonces, a no ser ahora.

Pudo advertir que la seguridad con que su esposo había pronunciado estas palabras tuvo la virtud de inducirle a alzar la cabeza y, fijando la mirada en los ojos de ella, hizo esta declaración de tal manera que ella sintió momentáneamente como si algo frío e inimaginable le llegara como un soplo, desde lejos, procedente del extraño razonamiento de Americo. Pero, incluso dominada por esta sensación, tampoco se inmutó:

—Lo que siempre he sabido más claramente es que jamás ninguno de los dos habéis querido ofendernos. Siempre habéis deseado intensamente evitarlo, y las precauciones que os habéis visto obligados a adoptar durante largo tiempo siempre me han impresionado en gran manera.

Hizo una pausa, y añadió:

—Ésta, creo yo, ha sido la manera más eficaz de llegar a saberlo.

Después de unos instantes, el Príncipe preguntó:

—¿A saberlo?

—A saberlo. A saber que erais amigos más antiguos y más íntimos de lo que yo podía racionalmente suponer cuando nos casamos. A saber que existían realidades que nunca se me comunicaron, lo cual daba significado, poco a poco, a otras cosas que tenía ante la vista.

—¿Y si las hubieras sabido, habrían afectado en algo nuestro matrimonio?

Después de pensar, la Princesa repuso:

—Puedo asegurarte que en nuestro caso, no.

Y mientras el Príncipe la miraba con una fija ansiedad que no podía atemperar, Maggie dijo:

—El problema es mucho más amplio. Puedes imaginarte la profundidad que toma para mí por el hecho de saberlo.

Esto era lo que producía efectos en el Príncipe, esta reiteración del conocimiento de Maggie con respecto a la validez de los diversos aspectos de la cuestión, de lo que el Príncipe no podía en aquel momento intentar evadirse en modo alguno. Lo que representaba para él la afirmación de Maggie, tal como la formulaba, no podía evitar ponerlo de manifiesto, aunque sólo fuera a modo de consecuencia que el significado de la palabra, del repetido «ahora sé», «sé», producía en sus nervios. Maggie era capaz de compadecerse de su nerviosismo, en una ocasión como la presente, en que necesitaba tener pleno dominio de los nervios para cenar fuera de casa. En circunstancias solemnes, no sin cierto sentido de la responsabilidad, no estaba dispuesta a permitir que se le impidiera servirse, sacando el máximo provecho, de tan preciosa oportunidad para expresarse de modo sumamente claro. Maggie dijo:

—Debes recordar que no te he obligado a escuchar lo que te estoy diciendo, y esta escena probablemente no se habría producido si no hubieras venido aquí.

El Príncipe observó:

—Lo más probable es que viniera, creo yo.

—No pensaba que lo hicieras esta noche. —¿Y por qué no iba a hacerlo?

—Porque tus probables ocupaciones son muchas y de muy diferentes clases.

Estas palabras recordaron a la Princesa lo que había dicho hacía poco a Fanny Assingham, por lo que añadió:

—Eres muy hondo, muy profundo.

A pesar del dominio que sobre su expresión tenía el Príncipe, estas palabras fueron causa de una rápida sucesión de gestos, con cierto matiz de muecas, que pusieron de relieve, como nada podía hacerlo, la raza a que Americo pertenecía:

—Eres tú, *cara*, la profunda, la honda.

Al cabo de unos instantes, Maggie aceptó esta calificación que le había dado su marido. Por fin, se daba cuenta de que era verdad. Dijo:

—En ése caso, necesitaré toda mi profundidad.

En ese instante el Príncipe preguntó:

—¿Y qué habrías hecho si yo no hubiera venido?

—No lo sé.

Después de dudar unos instantes, Maggie preguntó:

—¿Y tú qué habrías hecho?

—¿Yo? La pregunta carece de importancia. Todo dependería de ti. Yo hubiera seguido portándome como siempre. ¿Hubieras hablado mañana?

—Creo que hubiera esperado.

—¿A qué?

—A ver por mí misma el cambio que en mí producía. Quiero decir el cambio que en mí producía estar, por fin, en posesión de un conocimiento real.

—¡Oh!

—De todas maneras, lo único importante para mí ahora es ver el cambio que produce en ti. Desde el momento en que has entrado, lo único importante para mí ha sido que tú lo supieras.

Y Maggie tuvo que volver a decirlo, tuvo que obligar de nuevo al Príncipe:

—Que supieras que he dejado…

Hizo una pausa que tuvo el efecto de obligarle a apremiarla:

—¿Qué has dejado…?

—De estar, como estaba, en la ignorancia. He dejado de no saber.

Al cabo de unos instantes, estas palabras volvieron a producir el efecto de alertar al Príncipe, pero lo singular del caso fue que él parecía desear que su esposa le dijera algo más de este tenor. Volvió a dudar, pero, por fin, manifestó ese extraño impulso:

—¿Hay alguien más que haya llegado a semejante conocimiento?

Esto era cuanto él podía aproximarse a mencionar al señor Verver.

Maggie le mantuvo a distancia:

—¿Alguien más?

—Quiero decir alguien que no sea Fanny Assingham.

—Creo que a estas alturas habrás tenido ocasiones sobradas de enterarte; realmente, ignoro por qué me lo preguntas.

Un instante después, y Maggie pudo percatarse de ello, el Príncipe comprendió lo que había querido decir, y que, por extraño que parezca, le hizo comprender a Maggie que Charlotte, sabía tan poco como el Príncipe había sabido. Bajo esta luz, la visión se acrecentó resplandeciente durante unos segundos, la visión de los otros dos juntos, solos, en Fawns, en donde Charlotte tenía que avanzar a tientas, sin saber, siempre sin saber. Al mismo tiempo, el cuadro adquirió todo su esencial color, el de conocer y comparar los principios y los motivos de su padre con los suyos propios. Su padre era «hondo», «profundo», como Americo decía, y se esforzaba en que ni siquiera una vibración del aire quieto alcanzara a su hija, de la misma manera que ésta había merecido dicha calificación gracias a haber convertido y a proponerse seguir convirtiendo sus desvelos en pro de la serenidad de su padre o, por lo menos, de la firme apariencia de su

dignidad toda ella de maravilloso esmalte, en ley suprema de su comportamiento. Y más extraño que cuanto hasta el momento había sucedido fue el que ahora su marido causara la impresión de hablar animado por el deseo de ayudarla en este empeño:

—Sólo sé lo que me has dicho.

—Te he dicho cuanto quería decirte. ¡Descubre el resto!

—¿Que lo descubra?

Después de decir estas palabras, el Príncipe esperó. Maggie guardó silencio, de pie ante él. Sólo fue un momento el que necesitó para proseguir. Aparecía profundidad tras profundidad de la situación en que se hallaba, y se hundía en su interior mientras se enfrentaba con el rostro del Príncipe, aunque una vez más estas profundidades la elevaban en vez de hundirla. Tenía las plantas de los pies asentadas en un lugar firme en todo momento, y era su marido quien, de una forma absoluta, se hallaba perdido en el mar. Ella mantenía las plantas asentadas. Las oprimía contra lo que tenían debajo. Se acercó al cordón de la campanilla que pendía junto al hogar, y tiró de él de manera que el Príncipe sólo pudiera creer que llamaba a la doncella. Este acto lo detuvo todo por el momento. Con ello le indicaba que debía ir a vestirse para la cena. Pero Maggie tuvo que insistir:

—¡Descubre el resto por ti mismo!

Quinta parte

Capítulo XXXV

Una vez que se constituyó el grupito de Fawns —que requirió unos diez días para que el proceso quedara terminado íntegramente— de una forma natural Maggie se sintió dotada de un dominio todavía mayor sobre cuanto había sucedido últimamente en Londres. Recordó una frase usual en aquella Norteamérica de la que ya llevaba años alejada. Según dicha frase, ella estaba viviendo el momento cumbre de su vida, y lo sabía gracias al constante latir de esa sensación de dominio que era tan violenta que casi no se podía aceptar, ni casi se podía ocultar. Era como si hubiera salido, ésta era la sensación generalmente dominante, como si hubiera salido de un oscuro túnel, de un espeso bosque, o sencillamente de una estancia de aire húmedo, y a pesar de ello hubiera podido seguir adelante con aire fresco en los pulmones. Era como si, por fin, pudiera cosechar el fruto de su paciencia. 0 había sido más paciente de lo que había creído mientras lo era, o lo había sido durante más tiempo del que había imaginado, y el cambio comportaba una alteración tan grande de la visión, como si hubiera movido en una pulgada el ajuste de un telescopio. En realidad, el telescopio de Maggie había ganado mucho en alcance; pero al mismo tiempo el peligro de Maggie consistía en quedar expuesta a la observación ajena, por el uso más fascinante y, en consecuencia, más imprudente, de su artilugio óptico. La norma que aplicaba constantemente radicaba en no servirse en público del telescopio en ningún caso. Sin embargo, las dificultades del disimulo no habían disminuido, en tanto que su necesidad se había duplicado. La charlatanería de que se había servido en el trato con su padre había sido tarea relativamente sencilla, cuando la utilizaba en base a una simple duda. Pero ahora el terreno en el que debía operar era mucho más amplio, y tenía la sensación de ser algo así como una joven actriz que, después de habérsele encomendado un papel de escasa importancia en una obra, y de dominar con ansioso esfuerzo todas las frases, se encuentra de repente elevada al rango de primera actriz y tiene que estar en escena en los cinco actos de la obra.

Aquella noche, en Londres, Maggie había sacado ante su marido gran partido de su «saber», pero ahora le constaba que esto, desde el instante en que no le quedaba más remedio que disimularlo, incrementaba su responsabilidad, responsabilidad que nacía de estar en posesión de algo de gran valor y extremadamente perecedero. En este aspecto, nadie podía ayudarla, ni siquiera Fanny Assingham, porque la presencia de esta buena amiga había llegado a representar inevitablemente, después del momento culminante de su última conversación con ella en la casa de Portland Place, sólo una parte de la función muy simplificada. Fanny era útil en mil ocasiones, pero a partir de entonces su utilidad sólo podía consistir en no tocar de modo harto ostentoso, por lo menos ante Maggie, aspecto alguno del tema que habían abordado. Fanny estaba allí presente como una persona extremadamente valiosa, pero su valor consistía solamente en negarlo todo de forma tajante. Era exactamente, para todas las partes interesadas, el emblema de su beatitud sin tacha, y la pobrecilla tenía que representar este papel notablemente arduo lo mejor que podía. En privado podía dejar de interpretarlo, caso de que fuera necesario, ante Americo y ante Charlotte, aunque ante el dueño de la casa, desde luego que no, ni siquiera por un instante. Este abandono de la interpretación del papel que le correspondía era problema que sólo a ella afectaba, y del que, por el momento, Maggie podía prescindir. Entretanto, debemos decir que Fanny trataba a su joven amiga de suerte que en manera alguna le revelaba las antedichas vacilaciones; desde el momento en que Fanny se apeó ante la puerta de la casa, en compañía del coronel, todo se desarrolló armoniosamente, como si se tratara de la interpretación

de un concierto. A fin de cuentas, ¿qué había hecho aquella tarde, en Londres, sino unir a marido y mujer mucho más de lo que, al parecer, habían estado unidos en cualquier otro momento anterior? En consecuencia, ¿podía Fanny cometer indiscreción mayor que la de discrepar de las grandiosas apariencias de su triunfo? Hacerlo equivaldría a poner en tela de juicio su benemérita obra. Por lo tanto, sólo veía armonía a su alrededor y sólo difundía paz, una paz pródiga, expresiva, agresiva, nada incongruente con la inquebrantable calma que imperaba en la casa; en resumen, una especie de *pax Britannica* con casco y tridente en ristre.

Debemos añadir que, al paso de los días, esta paz se había convertido en una paz muy animada y poblada, gracias a la presencia de unos invitados en los que la habilidad de Maggie para mantener las apariencias, aprendida largo tiempo atrás, encontraba sus mejores instrumentos. No pasaba desapercibido, sino al contrario, saltaba a la vista que el recurso a estos instrumentos, precisamente ahora, parecía satisfacer en grado sumo las necesidades de todos, como si todos, por la multiplicación de seres humanos en el escenario, por la creación y confusión de falsos aconteceres, albergaran la esperanza de que todos los demás no se fijaran en ellos. En realidad, se había llegado al punto de que el pecho colectivo de los presentes jadeara esperanzado al conocer que habían desembarcado en cercanas playas, para estar en tierra un breve período de tiempo, la señora Rance y las Lutche, quienes seguían unidas y al mismo tiempo divididas, en vista a la conquista; por fin, se dio el raro caso de que el parecer del grupo se mostró favorable a albergar la idea de que la presencia de dichas señoras diera lugar, en breve, a pasar un fin de semana con ellas. A Maggie esto le dio la medida del camino que todos juntos habían recorrido desde aquella inolvidable tarde de un año no muy lejano, desde aquel decisorio domingo de septiembre en que, sentada junto a su padre en el parque, como si recordaran el momento culminante de su antiguo modo de vida y de sus antiguos peligros, propuso al señor Verver llamar a Charlotte, llamarla como se llama al especialista para que acuda junto al inválido en silla de ruedas. ¿No era signo un tanto portentoso el que estuvieran dispuestos a someterse a la observación, como si les distrajera de las otrora despreciadas Kitty y Dotty? En realidad, lo que acabamos de decir ya había tenido lugar en el caso de la invitación cursada por Maggie a los Castledean y a otros asistentes a la histórica reunión de Matcham, invitaciones que formuló antes de abandonar Londres, animada en todo momento por una idea, ya que a partir de ahora jamás iba a tratar a aquella gente sin una idea concreta, y el estimulante elemento de la relación con esta gente adquiría más importancia en el trato sucesivo. La llama con que esta idea daba renovado calor a esos determinados días, el modo en que cual antorcha iluminaba cualquier cosa, todo lo que pudiera ocurrir como culminación de las celebraciones nacidas de las tradiciones así revitalizadas, justificaba el motivo privado de Maggie y consagraba de nuevo su diplomacia. Con la ayuda de estas personas, ya había conseguido producir parte del efecto que buscaba, el efecto de «servir» para todo aquello para lo que sus amigos servían, y el de no pedir a ninguno de ellos renunciar a alguien o a algo por ella. Y, dicho sea francamente, en esto se daba una penetrante agudeza que le gustaba, ya que ella daba prestancia a la verdad que deseaba ilustrar, la verdad consistente en que la apariencia de su reciente vida, estrechamente adornada con la flor de un empeño entusiasta, dotada de todas las formas de lo terso y de lo indubitado, no mostraba síntomas en parte alguna de quedar alterada. Era como si, sometidos bajo su presión, ninguno de los miembros participantes pudiera liberarse de lo que bien cabe denominar complicidad de los otros; era, dicho sea en pocas palabras, como si Maggie viera a Americo y a Charlotte obligados, por el temor de traicionarse, a observar una especie de vaga coherencia en lo tocante al «grupo» de lady Castledean, en tanto que los miembros de este grupo, por idénticas razones, quedaban obligados a ratificar manifestaciones cuyo sentido y alcance no acertaban a comprender debidamente, y les dejaban, a pesar de su hereditario optimismo, un tanto desorientados e incluso atemorizados.

Sin embargo, en Fawns, los miembros de este grupo contribuían a la animación y a la algazara, e interpretaban su papel durante una crisis que debían presentir vagamente en los largos corredores de la vieja mansión, como si se tratase del tradicional fantasma de la casa en las horas nocturnas, más bien que como la amenaza surgida a la luz del día de personas ajenas al grupo claramente apercibidas, esas personas que había peligro de encontrar en el salón y de tener sentadas al lado de la mesa. Además, si la Princesa no hubiera gozado con su secreta utilización de tan compleja máquina de disimulos, no por ello habría dejado de sentir cierta satisfacción al observar las ventajas que de dicha maquinaria sacaba ahora la maltratada filosofía de Fanny Assingham. La relación de esta buena amiga con tal maquinaria creaba una situación de *revanche*, como la propia señora Assingham daba a entender paladinamente, por el escaso lustre del que su persona gozó en Matcham, en donde no se hallaba tan familiarizada con las formas de comportamiento

como los demás invitados. Por el contrario, como Maggie pudo advertir, la señora Assingham, en Fawns, por el medio de internarse en la selva sin senderos, se encontraba mucho más a sus anchas que los demás. En la venganza de la señora Assingham se daba la doble magnanimidad de indicar a todos los demás cuál era el tono justo, algo parecido a una tutela maravillosamente irresistible, consciente y casi compasiva. Constantemente daba a entender con aire de triunfo que aquélla era una casa en la que rebosaban valores a cuyo servicio podían ponerse algunos de los restantes invitados, y que estaba divertidamente dispuesta a compartir con algunos de ellos momentáneamente obnubilados, vagamente desconcertados, que habían perdido el rumbo que les era propio. Bien pudo deberse, en parte, al efecto de ese sentido especial de comunidad con su vieja amiga el que una noche Maggie se sintiera inducida a reanudar con ella el abandonado modo de referencia directa. Se habían quedado las dos en la planta baja hasta hora avanzada. Las otras mujeres se habían ido, solas o emparejadas, ascendiendo la «grandiosa» escalinata que permitía que los ascensos y descensos fueran agradablemente observados desde el igualmente grandioso salón. Los hombres, evidentemente, se habían dirigido a fumar a otra estancia destinada a tal efecto. Pero la Princesa, hallándose en situación de poder observar el insólito panorama antes mencionado, se había demorado para gozar de él. Entonces advirtió que la señora Assingham se rezagaba un poco como si quisiera apreciar debidamente el goce de que aquélla disfrutaba; de esta manera, las dos quedaron mirándose, separadas por el amplio y desierto espacio, hasta que la mayor de las dos mujeres, ahora vagamente expresiva y como si tanteara el terreno, se acercó un poco a la otra. Fue como preguntar si podía ser de alguna utilidad, y esta pregunta quedó contestada por la inmediata sensación de hallarse, al estar más cerca, como se había hallado en la casa de Portland Place, obedeciendo a la perentoria convocatoria de Maggie. La comprensión entre las dos se reanudó en estos nuevos momentos fortuitamente conseguidos, en el mismo punto en que quedó interrumpida en la otra ocasión.

—Él nunca le ha dicho a Charlotte que yo lo sé. De esto, por lo menos, estoy segura.

La señora Assingham abrió desmesuradamente los ojos. La Princesa prosiguió:

—Cuando llegamos aquí, me hallaba yo a oscuras en este punto, sin saber lo que Americo había estado haciendo o proponiéndose hacer, sin saber lo que había pasado entre ellos dos. Pero al cabo de uno o dos días comencé a vislumbrar la verdad, y esta noche, por muchas razones, demasiadas para decirlas, lo he sabido con seguridad; sí, todo ha quedado explicado. Nada se han dicho. Esto es lo que ha ocurrido.

Con energía, la Princesa repitió:

—¡Ha quedado explicado, explicado, explicado!

Hablaba en un tono que su interlocutora calificaría después, ante el coronel, aunque parezca raro, de sumamente serena excitación. La Princesa regresó junto al hogar en donde, en honor de la humedad del día y frescor de la noche, los leños apilados se habían transformado en llamas, reduciéndose luego a cenizas. Y la evidente importancia de lo que había comunicado a Fanny Assingham fue motivo de que ésta guardara silencio. Este notable hecho explicaba realmente mucho más de lo que la señora Assingham, a pesar de tener clara conciencia de haberse quedado con la boca abierta, llevada por su buena voluntad, podía tomar de una sola vez. Sin embargo, la Princesa, en su confianza y benevolencia, rápidamente colmó la laguna:

—No quiere que sepa que lo sé, y evidentemente está dispuesto a que no lo sepa. Sí, ha tomado una decisión. No le dirá nada. En consecuencia, como ella es incapaz de llegar a saberlo por sí misma, no puede tener idea de lo mucho que en realidad sé. Cree y, en la medida de su propio convencimiento, sabe que nada sé. Esto, en cierto aspecto, me parece de inmensa ayuda para mí.

La señora Assingham, sin comprenderlo todavía totalmente, murmuró en tono de celebración:

—¡Inmensa, querida!

Y luego preguntó:

—¿Y él calla a propósito?

Los ojos de Maggie se iluminaron como si vieran verdades situadas muy lejos, en puntos a los que su vista jamás llegaría. Dijo:

—A propósito. Ahora jamás se lo dirá.

Fanny quedó maravillada. Miró a su alrededor. Admiraba en gran manera a su joven amiga, en quien la averiguación de la conducta del Príncipe estaba animada por heroica lucidez. Allí estaba Maggie, vestida de uniforme, de pie, como el menudo y erecto comandante de las fuerzas que asedian una plaza, al que un nervioso capitán acaba de darle noticias, sumamente importantes para él, de la aparición de banderías y disensiones en la plaza sitiada. Fanny dijo:

—En consecuencia, ¿no tiene problemas?

—Esto sería mucho decir. Pero tengo la impresión, que antes no tenía, de saber dónde estoy en este caso.

Fanny meditó generosamente. Había un punto que había quedado un tanto vago:

—¿Y se lo ha dicho él? ¿Su propio marido se lo ha dicho a usted?

—¿A mí?

—Sí, lo que quiero decir es si le ha contado esto que usted me dice. ¿No ha hablado usted basándose en lo que él le ha dicho?

Siguió mirándola fijamente y contestó:

—¡Dios mío, no! ¿Imagina que le he pedido que me lo dijera?

—¿No?

Fanny esbozó una sonrisa y añadió:

—Suponía que era esto lo que usted quería decir. Entonces, ¿qué le ha…?

—¿Qué le he pedido? Nada.

Esto fue causa de que Fanny, a su vez, quedara con la mirada fija en la Princesa:

—En este caso, la noche de la cena en la embajada, ¿no pasó nada entre ustedes dos?

—Al contrario, pasó todo.

—¿Todo?

—Todo. Le dije lo que sabía, y le dije la manera en que había llegado a saberlo.

Después de esperar unos instantes, la señora Assingham observó:

—¿Y esto fue todo?

—¿Le parece poco?

No sin severidad, la señora Assingham observó:

—A usted corresponde juzgar si fue poco o mucho.

—Pues ya lo he juzgado. Lo juzgué. Hice lo preciso para que mi marido comprendiera, y luego le dejé en paz.

Intrigada, la señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿Y no le dio explicaciones?

Maggie echó la cabeza atrás como si esa idea la horrorizara:

—¿Explicaciones? ¡No, a Dios gracias! Y al instante añadió:

—Y yo tampoco.

La evidencia del orgullo que había en estas palabras difundió una luz leve y fría, aunque desde unas cumbres en cuya base se hallaba Fanny Assingham jadeando. Fanny preguntó:

—Y su marido, ¿ni niega ni confiesa?

—Hace algo que es mil veces mejor. No habla del asunto. Se comporta de un modo que es muy suyo. Se comporta como ahora comprendo tenía la seguridad de que se comportaría. Me deja en paz.

—En ese caso, ¿cómo sabe, como usted dice, «dónde está» usted?

—Precisamente por eso. Le hice saber la diferencia que se había producido, la diferencia producida por mí por no haber sido yo tan estúpida como para no llegar a conocerlo aunque con la ayuda, lo reconozco, de una maravillosa coincidencia. Mi marido tenía que ver que he cambiado con respecto a él, que soy muy diferente de la idea que él ha tenido de mí durante tanto tiempo. Todo consistió en que se diera cuenta del cambio, y ahora veo que se está dando cuenta.

Fanny siguió esta explicación lo mejor que pudo, y preguntó:

—¿Y su marido lo da a entender dejándola en paz, como usted dice? Maggie miró fijamente a Fanny largo rato, y dijo:

—Y dejándola en paz a ella.

La señora Assingham se esforzó en comprender, un tanto frenada por un pensamiento que era lo más próximo que podía tener, en aquel cuadro excesivamente grande, a una inspiración:

—¿Y Charlotte también le deja en paz a él?

—Bueno, esto es otro asunto que prácticamente casi en nada me concierne. Sin embargo, me atrevería a decir que no.

La mirada de Maggie se hizo más distante para poder ver con mayor precisión la imagen evocada por la pregunta. Entonces dijo:

—En realidad, no creo que pueda dejarle en paz. Pero para mí lo importante es que mi marido comprende.

Fanny Assingham, serenada, dijo:

—Sí… ¿comprende?

—Comprende lo que quiero. Quiero una felicidad en la que no haya siquiera un orificio en el que pueda meter la punta de un dedo.

—Una superficie brillante y perfecta, al menos para empezar. Sí, comprendo.

—La copa dorada, tal como hubiera debido ser.

Y Maggie contempló, meditativa, la oscura imagen evocada. Dijo:

—La copa conteniendo toda la felicidad. La copa sin la grieta.

También para la señora Assingham esta imagen tenía fuerza; el precioso objeto volvió a quedar esplendente ante su vista, esplendente, reconstruido, aceptable, digno de ser ofrecido. Pero ¿no faltaba allí algo? La señora Assingham preguntó:

—Pero ¿si él la deja en paz y usted le deja…?

—¿Quiere decir que eso nos delatará? ¿Que los demás se darán cuenta? Bueno, tenemos esperanzas de que no sea así, procuramos que no ocurra, andamos con mucho tiento. Sólo nosotros sabemos lo que ocurre entre nosotros. Nosotros y usted. Y desde el momento en que usted llegó a esta casa, ¿no ha quedado impresionada por lo bien que representamos nuestra comedia?

La amiga de Maggie, dubitativa, preguntó:

—¿Ante su padre?

Esta pregunta la hizo vacilar. No quería hablar de su padre. Dijo:

—Ante todos. Ante ella… ahora que usted comprende.

Estas palabras volvieron a dejar desorientada a la pobre Fanny, que replicó:

—Ante Charlotte, sí. Teniendo en consideración la importancia que el asunto tiene para usted, teniendo en cuenta el plan trazado; esto, precisamente esto, es lo que les mantiene unidos.

Exultante de admiración, la señora Assingham exclamó:

—¡Es usted un ser incomparable, es realmente extraordinaria!

Recibió agradecida estos elogios, aunque no sin algunas reservas:

—No, no soy extraordinaria; pero soy, ante todo, serena.

—Bueno, pues precisamente esto es lo extraordinario. «Serena» es mucho más de lo que yo pueda llegar a ser jamás.

Después de decir estas palabras, la señora Assingham meditó sin rebozo alguno:

—Usted ha dicho que yo «comprendo», pero hay una cosa que no comprendo.

Tras unos minutos de silencio, durante los cuales Maggie esperó, la señora Assingham prosiguió:

—A fin de cuentas, ¿cómo es posible que Charlotte no haya presionado al Príncipe, no le haya atacado sobre este asunto? ¿Cómo es posible que no le haya preguntado; quiero decir que no le haya preguntado, haciéndole dar su palabra de honor, si usted sabe?

—¿Cómo es posible que «no»?

Después de decir estas palabras, la Princesa afirmó lisa y llanamente:

—Desde luego, forzosamente ha tenido que preguntárselo.

—¿Entonces…?

—Entonces, ¿cree usted que él se lo ha dicho? Lo que yo quería decir es que mi marido jamás hará semejante cosa, sino todo lo contrario.

—¿Ni aun en el caso de que Charlotte le pida directamente que le diga la verdad?

—Ni siquiera así.

—¿Ni siquiera apelando a su honor?

—Ni siquiera apelando a su honor. Ésta es precisamente mi afirmación básica.

Pero insistió desafiante:

—¿Ni aun pidiéndole que le diga la verdad a ella?

—No se la dirá a ella ni a nadie.

A la señora Assingham se le iluminó el rostro. Dijo:

—En ese caso, ¿su marido habrá mentido sencilla y constantemente?

—Habrá mentido sencilla y constantemente.

La señora Assingham volvió a quedar impresionada. Sin embargo, en el mismo instante, en impulsivo movimiento se arrojó sobre Maggie, abrazándola por el cuello, y en tono exaltado exclamó:

—¡Oh, si supiera cuánto me ayuda!

Maggie había querido que Fanny Assingham comprendiera, en la medida de lo posible; pero poco tardó en advertir cuán corta era esa medida, a poco que se pensara en ello, por misteriosas razones que Maggie prefería no indagar. Esta incapacidad de comprensión de la señora Assingham no era sorprendente si tenemos en cuenta que la propia Princesa sólo ahora podía envanecerse de haber llegado al fondo del asunto. Maggie vivía en un estado de conciencia que sólo parcialmente podía revelar a su buena amiga; además, la inspección que la propia Maggie efectuaba de su estado de conciencia, en toda su extensión aún no había terminado. Sin embargo, estos recovecos de su imaginación habían sido anteriormente más oscuros de lo que lo eran ahora. Ella los había contemplado, en la víspera de su salida de Londres, casi sin ver nada en ellos. En el curso de aquellas horas y, a decir verdad, de los días siguientes, poco había visto que no fuera la rareza de una relación cuya nota principal —tanto si llegaba a ser prolongada como si no— consistía en la carencia de resultados «íntimos» surgidos de la crisis cara a cara, aunque brevemente, en la mañana del día siguiente al de la escena en su aposento, pero con la extraña consecuencia de dejar el problema enteramente en manos de su marido. El Príncipe había recibido la crisis de manos de su esposa como si ésta le hubiera entregado un manojo de llaves o una lista de diligencias, prestando atención a las instrucciones de su esposa, pero limitándose a ponerlo cuidadosamente a buen recaudo en el bolsillo. Con el paso de los días las instrucciones recibidas en nada modificaron el comportamiento del Príncipe en su hablar y en sus silencios, y no dieron ningún fruto en lo referente a sus actos. El Príncipe había aceptado de su esposa, inmediatamente antes de ir a vestirse para la cena, todo lo que ésta quiso darle; luego, a la mañana siguiente, le había pedido más, como si durante la noche Maggie hubiera repuesto existencias; pero en esta ocasión el Príncipe actuó con perfecto dominio de cierto aire de extraordinaria imparcialidad y discreción; un aire que venía a representar algo parecido a un recurso ante la superioridad; un aire que si la Princesa se hubiera rebajado a calificar de vulgar, lo habría hecho llamándolo «frío», de la misma manera que el propio Príncipe lo habría calificado, en cualquier otra persona, de «descarado», con ciertas sugerencias de que la Princesa debía confiar en él, en aquel asunto concreto, ya que no confiaba en todo lo demás. Para la Princesa, las palabras y los silencios de su marido, en aquel momento de tensión, no tuvieron un significado diferente del que habían tenido en las semanas precedentes. Sin embargo, si la mente de la Princesa no hubiera rechazado de forma absoluta la posibilidad de que su esposo albergara intenciones de ofenderla, hubiera interpretado que los imperturbables modales de su marido y la perfección con que parecía haber recobrado el aplomo revelaban una de esas intenciones altamente impertinentes por cuyo medio los grandes de esta tierra, *les grands seigneurs*, las personas de la clase y del tipo de su marido, siempre saben restablecer el orden alterado.

Tuvo Maggie la gran fortuna de adquirir la seguridad de que semejante impertinencia no se contaba entre las artes en que el Príncipe se proponía confiar, ya que si no había dado contestación a nada, nada había negado, nada había explicado y de nada se había excusado, y había conseguido comunicar de algún modo a Maggie que no se debía a haber decidido que el problema carecía de importancia. En ambas ocasiones el Príncipe había dado muestras de consideración en el modo en que escuchó a su esposa, a pesar de que al mismo tiempo se había comportado con extremada reserva; aunque también debemos recordar que esta reserva estuvo matizada en la segunda y más breve conversación sostenida en Portland Place, ya al final, por el hecho en que Maggie imaginó que el Príncipe se disponía a proponerle una solución transaccional momentánea. Fue solamente algo que había en el fondo de la mirada que el Príncipe le dirigió, y allí vio ésta con más claridad, a medida que sostenía la mirada, la tácita propuesta de un acuerdo a efectos prácticos. «Déjame mi reserva, no me la discutas, es lo único que me queda, ¿o es que no te das cuenta?, si me concedes quedarme a solas con mi reserva durante el tiempo que estime preciso, te prometo darte algo amparado por dicha reserva, algo que todavía no sé qué es, a cambio de tu paciencia.» Dio media vuelta, alejándose del Príncipe, mientras estas palabras no pronunciadas sonaban en sus oídos; Maggie tuvo que imaginar que había oído en su espíritu semejantes palabras, tuvo que volverlas a escuchar, evocándolas, a fin de explicarse la paciencia que había tenido al tolerar que Americo no las dijera. El Príncipe ni siquiera había pretendido por un instante dar respuesta a la pregunta implícita en la manifestación de ignorancia formulada por Maggie con respecto al momento en que, en el período anterior a su matrimonio, había comenzado la intimidad con Charlotte. Teniendo en cuenta que se trataba de una ignorancia que Charlotte y el Príncipe habían estado personalmente interesados en mantener —hasta el punto de proteger con consumada habilidad, durante años, sus recíprocos intereses al respecto—; teniendo en cuenta que se trataba de una condición impuesta a Maggie, el que dicha intimidad hubiera cesado por el momento era el primer punto de la defensa del Príncipe. Sin embargo, sólo había dedicado a este aspecto su

más larga mirada de consideración a tener en cuenta. Había rendido fríamente este tributo a la cuestión, y Maggie hubiera quedado realmente pasmada si ahora no tuviera otros puntos en que apoyarse, al ver su actual capacidad de enfrentarse con este capítulo de la historia en el que no hubiera sido capaz de sumergirse sin sentir escalofríos una semana atrás. Al paso en que ahora se desarrollaba su vida, Maggie se acostumbraba de hora en hora a estas ampliaciones del panorama que ante ella tenía, y cuando se preguntaba a sí misma, en Fawns, a qué observación formulada por ella en Londres, el Príncipe había opuesto una afirmación, poco le faltaba para transformar en su imaginación a la joven y tensa esposa de los momentos aludidos, en la jadeante bailarina que interpreta una difícil danza y que, ante las candilejas de un teatro vacío, ha dedicado una pirueta a un espectador adormilado en un palco.

La mejor manera que Maggie tenía de comprender el éxito alcanzado por Americo en no comprometerse consistía en recordar las preguntas que éste le había hecho en la única ocasión en que volvieron a abordar el tema, cosa que él había provocado explícitamente a fin de formularlas. Consiguió que Maggie volviera a explicarle el tan notable incidente de su conversación con el pequeño tendero de Bloomsbury. No es de sorprender que el Príncipe necesitara que se le narrara esta anécdota de forma un poco más directa, y la actitud que él adoptó marcó el momento en que más se acercó a la postura de quien formula un interrogatorio. La mayor dificultad respecto al hombrecillo de la tienda radicó en los motivos que le animaron: en primer lugar su motivo para escribir, animado por el espíritu de la retractación, a una señora con la que había cerrado un trato sumamente favorable para él, y luego el motivo de ir a verla porque sus disculpas tuvieron un carácter más personal. Maggie estimó que la explicación que dio al Príncipe era un tanto débil, pero así fueron los hechos, y no podía tergiversarlos. Al quedarse solo después de la transacción, con el conocimiento de que la señora que le había visitado tenía intención de regalar a su padre, en ocasión de su cumpleaños —Maggie confesó al Príncipe que había conversado con el hombrecillo casi como si fuera un amigo—, el vendedor de la copa dorada actuó llevado por un escrúpulo insólito en todo género de vendedores y casi sin precedentes en los aprovechados hijos de Israel. Al hombrecillo de la tienda de Bloomsbury no le había gustado lo que había hecho, y sobre todo haberlo hecho tan provechosamente. Al pensar en la buena fe y encantadora presencia de la compradora, en comparación con la tara de la compra que hacía, que la convertía verdaderamente en cuanto a obsequio a un padre amado, en objeto de siniestro significado y maléficos efectos, el vendedor experimentó remordimientos de conciencia, sintió supersticiosos sentimientos y obedeció a un impulso harto notable, teniendo en cuenta su mentalidad comercial, tanto más notable si aclaramos que jamás le había atormentado en otros casos. Maggie reconoció la rareza de esta aventura y la relató lisa y llanamente sin darle interpretaciones. Por otra parte, no se dio cuenta de que si esta aventura no hubiera afectado tan de cerca a Americo, éste la habría considerado tan sólo materia de divertida reflexión. El Príncipe emitió un extraño sonido, entre carcajada y aullido, cuando ella le dijo con evidente retintín: «Ciertamente el vendedor me dijo que la razón por la que había venido a verme radicaba en que me había tomado simpatía». Sin embargo, la Princesa albergada dudas acerca de si esta brusca declaración del comerciante había sido motivada por las familiaridades que ella le había ofrecido o por su tolerancia de las que había tenido que padecer. Que la otra parte contratante en dicho trato había ansiado volverla a ver, y que evidentemente se había aprovechado del pretexto que se le ofrecía, también lo expresó francamente al Príncipe, indicando que se había percatado de ello inmediatamente, pero que no le dio ningún chasco al vendedor, ni se escandalizó, sino que por el contrario su actitud fue positivamente agradecida y satisfecha. Con toda seriedad, el vendedor manifestó sus deseos de devolverle parte del precio pagado, pero que declinó sinceramente la oferta. Acto seguido el vendedor expresó sus esperanzas de que la Princesa, de todas maneras, no le hubiera dado todavía a la copa de cristal el noble destino que tan amable y afortunadamente le había comunicado. La copa no era objeto adecuado para obsequiar a una persona amada, ya que difícilmente podía desear ofrecerle un regalo propicio a traer mala suerte. Esto era lo que el vendedor había pensado, y después de pensarlo no halló descanso, y estimaba que ahora se sentía mucho mejor por habérselo revelado a Maggie. El haberla inducido a actuar sumida en la ignorancia tenía avergonzado al vendedor, y si ella, dama magnánima, le perdonaba todas las libertades que se había tomado, bien podía dar a la copa dorada cualquier destino, menos uno.

Después de esto fue cuando ocurrió el más extraordinario de todos los incidentes, al indicar el vendedor dos fotografías, observando que se trataba de personas a las que conocía; pero lo que resultaba aún más raro era que las había conocido años atrás, precisamente en relación con el mismo objeto motivo de su visita. En aquella ocasión, la señora había tenido el capricho de ofrendar la copa al caballero, y el caballero, intuyendo la verdad y eludiendo los propósitos de la dama de forma muy inteligente, declaró que por nada

del mundo aceptaría un objeto tan sospechoso. A continuación, durante su visita a Maggie, el hombrecillo declaró que no hubiera tenido el menor inconveniente en vender el objeto a aquellos dos. De todas maneras, el hombrecillo jamás olvidó lo que los dos dijeron, ni su cara, ni la general impresión que le causaron, y si Maggie quería ahora realmente saber qué era lo que de manera especial le había inducido a actuar así, le diría que había sido la idea de que ésta compraba en la ignorancia un objeto que rechazaron por malo otras personas. Otro punto importante consistía en que el vendedor quedó inmensamente impresionado por el hecho de que Maggie, después de tanto tiempo, resultaba ser amiga de aquella pareja. Para el vendedor, los dos habían desaparecido, y nada más supo de ellos. El vendedor se ruborizó, quedando con la cara muy roja, al reconocer a las dos personas, al darse cuenta de su responsabilidad, y declaró que aquella coincidencia a la fuerza debía guardar, de modo misterioso, cierta relación con el impulso que le había llevado allí. Maggie, mientras su marido se hallaba de pie ante ella, no ocultó la fuerte impresión tan brusca y violentamente recibida. Incluso mientras recibía plenamente tal impresión, hizo cuanto pudo para no delatar sus sentimientos, aunque no sabía, no podía saber lo que en su agitación había inducido a su informador a pensar. Pudo pensar cualquier cosa, pues transcurrieron tres o cuatro minutos durante los cuales, mientras le formulaba pregunta tras pregunta, muy poco le había importado lo que aquél pensara. El hombrecillo había hablado de cuanto recordaba con la extensión que ella pudiera desear; había hablado, con deleite, de los vínculos que parecían unir a aquellos otros visitantes, y también de su convencimiento respecto a la naturaleza y al grado de su intimidad, que, a pesar de las precauciones que adoptaron, no pudieron ocultarle. El hombrecillo había observado, había juzgado y había recordado, llegando a la seguridad de que se trataba de grandes personajes, pero no le habían «gustado» tanto como la *Signara Principessa*. Ciertamente —y Maggie no fue ambigua en esta declaración— el vendedor anotó su nombre y sus señas, con la finalidad de enviarle la copa y la cuenta. Pero, con respecto a los otros dos, el vendedor se quedó sólo con interrogantes y con la seguridad de que jamás volverían a su tienda. Respecto al tiempo en que tuvo lugar la visita de los otros dos, el vendedor lo podía determinar con toda seguridad, debido a una importante transacción anotada en sus libros de contabilidad, que tuvo lugar pocas horas después de dicha visita. En resumen, el vendedor se fue evidentemente satisfecho de haber podido resarcir a Maggie de no haberse portado con absoluta franqueza en aquel pequeño negocio, resarcimiento que consistió en poderle prestar, de tan imprevista manera, el servicio de su información. Además, la satisfacción del hombrecillo también tenía su fuente en el personal interés que la amabilidad, la cortesía, la gracia, el encanto, y la sencilla humanidad y familiaridad de Maggie le había inspirado y en cuanto Americo quisiera imaginar. Todo lo cual mientras Maggie lo repasaba en su pensamiento una y otra vez —teniendo en cuenta la temeridad aneja al dolor y a la pasión del momento, así como el relato sencillo y directo, como tuvo que efectuarlo—, consideraba que bien podía constituir un notable acervo de interrogantes para el Príncipe.

Entretanto, después de que se hubieran ido los Castledean, que habían sido invitados para que coincidieran con ellos, y antes de que la señora Rance y las Lutche hubieran llegado, transcurrieron tres o cuatro días durante los cuales Maggie llegaría a saber hasta qué punto tenía necesidad de ser impenetrable, y entonces fue cuando sintió toda la fuerza y se arrojó sobre toda la ayuda de la verdad que había confiado unas cuantas noches antes a Fanny Assingham. Maggie lo sabía de antemano y se lo había dicho a sí misma cuando la casa estaba llena: Charlotte albergaba designios con respecto a ella, designios cuya naturaleza sólo Charlotte sabía, y esperaba la oportunidad más favorable cuando estuvieron menos acompañados. Este conocimiento había sido la mismísima base del deseo de Maggie de multiplicar los espectadores a su alrededor. En la vida de la Princesa había momentos de planeada demora, de evasión menos disimulada que estudiada, durante lo cuales meditaba con ansiedad las diferentes maneras —había dos o tres a lo sumo— en que su joven madrastra podía abordarla en caso necesario. El hecho de que Americo no hubiera comunicado a Charlotte las conversaciones habidas con su esposa daba, a juicio de ésta, un nuevo aspecto a las percepciones y condición de Charlotte, un aspecto con el cual por curiosidad y, en ciertos momentos, por incongruente que parezca, por compasión, ahora Maggie tenía que contar. Se preguntaba en su fuero interno —sí, era capaz de esto— qué pretendía el Príncipe al mantener a la partícipe de su culpa en la ignorancia de un tema que tan de cerca la afectaba, es decir, qué pretendía con respecto a ese inconfundiblemente engañado personaje. Podía imaginar lo que el Príncipe pretendía con respecto a ella misma, lo cual podía ser cualquier cosa imaginable, desde cuestiones de mera «forma», a cuestiones de sinceridad, cuestiones de piedad o cuestiones de prudencia. Por ejemplo, lo más probable es que el Príncipe hubiera pretendido primordialmente evitar todo signo de haberse producido un cambio en la relación entre

las dos mujeres, que su suegro pudiera percibir e interpretar. Sin embargo, habida cuenta de su intimidad con Charlotte, tenía a su disposición, para evitar este peligro, otros medios más lógicos y una enfática advertencia: la plena libertad de la alarma, la de señalar con insistencia a Charlotte el peligro en que se hallaban de despertar sospechas, y la correspondiente insistencia en la importancia de mantener a todo precio las apariencias de paz; esto habría sido, en realidad, el medio más concebible. Pero en vez de advertir y aconsejar a Charlotte, la había engañado y tranquilizado, de manera que nuestra joven amiga que, desde largo tiempo, por los hábitos propios de su naturaleza, se había esforzado en gran manera en evitar el sacrificio de los demás, como si creyera que el gran cepo de la vida estuviera principalmente dispuesto para producir estos sacrificios, se encontraba ahora orientando su imaginación hacia esta faceta de la situación de la pareja afectada, que comportaba, por lo menos en cuanto a ellos hacía referencia, el sacrificio del menos afortunado.

En la actualidad Maggie jamás pensaba en lo que Americo podía pretender sin efectuar al mismo tiempo la reflexión de que, fuera lo que fuese lo que pretendiera, mayor importancia tenía aún lo que dejaba a los recursos de su propio ingenio, del de Maggie. Cuanto llegaba el momento de actuar, Americo solamente la ayudaba mediante la brillante, quizá casi brillante en exceso, apariencia que ofrecían los modales con que trataba a su esposa, ante un mundillo admirado, lo que sin duda apenas merecía más que los elogios de que es merecedora la diplomacia negativa. Como Maggie había dicho a Fanny, su marido seguía observando unos perfectos modales, pero en realidad el caso habría llegado a extremos insospechados si, para colmo, hubiera usado con ella malos modales. Verdaderamente Maggie vivía horas de exaltación cuando el significado de todo esto ejercía presión en ella, como si se tratase de un tácito juramento prestado por el Príncipe de plegarse sin rechistar a cuanto ella pudiera conseguir o a cuanto estimara aconsejable prescribir. Estos eran los momentos en los que Maggie, incluso mientras contenía el aliento por el temor que experimentaba, se sentía verdaderamente capaz casi de cualquier cosa. Era como si hubiera pasado, en un período increíblemente breve, de ser nada para el Príncipe a serlo todo; era como si, en correcta interpretación, cada movimiento de la cabeza del Príncipe, las distintas modalidades de su voz, pudieran significar que sólo había un modo en el que un hombre altivo, reducido a la abyección, podría comportarse. Durante aquellas meditaciones en las que más claramente lo percibía, la imagen que ofrecía de su marido gozaba, para Maggie, de una belleza por cuya revelación estimaba con sorpresa que pagaba mucho menos de lo que valía. Con tal de poder percibir claramente esta belleza esplendente emanada de la humildad, esa humildad oculta en la altivez de la presencia del Príncipe, hubiera llegado a pagar más todavía, a pagar con dificultades y con ansiedades, comparadas con las cuales las presentes hubieran sido superficiales como jaquecas o días lluviosos.

Sin embargo, el punto en que esas exaltaciones menguaban era aquel en que pensaba que si sus complicaciones fueran mayores, el problema de pagar hubiera quedado todavía menos limitado a las posibilidades de su bolsillo. Las complicaciones actuales ya eran de por sí suficientemente graves, tanto en lo que tocaba al ejercicio del ingenio como en lo referente a las sublimes sensaciones, máxime si se tiene en cuenta que a menudo pensaba que quizá Charlotte hubiera estado luchando en todo momento con secretos todavía más dolorosos que los suyos. Era raro advertir la manera en que esta hipótesis determinaba y matizaba una y otra vez las interrogantes que Maggie se formulaba sobre los detalles, como, por ejemplo, la cuestión referente a la manera en que Americo, en contadas y difícilmente halladas oportunidades de conversación, tranquilizaba a la atormentada muchacha con falsas explicaciones, hacía frente a sus retos y se hurtaba a sus exigencias. Incluso la convicción de que Charlotte no hacía más que esperar la oportunidad de medir la magnitud de sus preocupaciones usando el efecto como medida a la esposa de su amante dejaba a Maggie con la sensación que produce la visión de alambres dorados y alas golpeadas en la espaciosa jaula, del hogar de la eterna inquietud, de idas y venidas, aleteos, estremecimientos en que la conciencia desconcertada estérilmente se encierra. La jaula era la condición de engaño, y Maggie, que sabía lo que era el engaño —¡y no poco!—, comprendía la esencia de las jaulas. Paseaba alrededor de la jaula de Charlotte cautelosamente, trazando un círculo muy amplio; cuando inevitablemente tenían que conversar, se sentía, en comparación con Charlotte fuera de la jaula, en el seno de la naturaleza, y el rostro de Charlotte se le antojaba el de una prisionera, mirando a través de la reja. Y a través de rejas, rejas bellamente doradas, pero firme y discretamente dispuestas, Charlotte le causó la impresión de estar efectuando un duro y triste esfuerzo, lo cual, al principio, indujo a la Princesa a echarse hacia atrás, como si la puerta de la jaula se hubiera abierto desde dentro.

Capítulo XXXVI

Aquella noche estaban solos, solos formando un grupo de seis; cuatro de los cuales, después de la cena, y de conformidad a una propuesta irresistible, se sentaron a jugar al bridge en la sala de fumar. Juntos habían pasado a esta estancia al levantarse de la mesa. Charlotte y la señora Assingham eran igualmente indulgentes en lo referente al trabajo; en realidad, practicaban una emulación de arte de fumar que, al decir de Fanny, y en cuanto hacía referencia a ella, hubiera llegado hasta la pipa si el coronel no hubiera dictado un decreto prohibitivo basado en el temor de que su esposa le robara sus cigarros. Con inevitable rapidez las cartas de la señora Assingham dominaron la situación; el juego se había organizado, como en frecuentes ocasiones anteriores, teniendo el señor Verver como compañera a la señora Assingham, en tanto que el Príncipe jugaba con la señora Verver. El coronel, que había pedido a Maggie permiso para aliviar su mente de la preocupación de escribir un par de cartas que debían salir en el primer correo de la mañana siguiente, se dedicaba a la tarea en un rincón de la estancia; la Princesa se había alegrado de que comenzaran aquellos momentos de relativa paz —los jugadores de bridge eran serios y silenciosos—, como la fatigada actriz que no tiene que estar en escena, mientras sus compañeros actúan, y aprovecha esta ocasión para echar una cabezada entre bambalinas en un sofá de otro decorado. La siesta de Maggie, si hubiera sido capaz de cerrar los ojos, antes hubiese sido del espíritu que de los sentidos. Sin embargo, tan pronto como quedó aposentada, junto a una lámpara, con el último número de una revista francesa de color salmón, ni siquiera pudo gozar del descanso de tan leve independencia.

Maggie descubrió que en modo alguno podía cerrar los ojos y alejarse de los demás. Sus ojos volvían a la vida por sí solos, quietos, por encima del borde superior de la revista. No podía fijar su atención en los refinamientos de la alta crítica que erizaban las páginas de la revista. Se encontraba allí, en el mismo lugar en que se hallaban sus compañeros; se encontraba una vez más allí, y más que en cualquier otro momento. Era como si de repente sus compañeros, según la personalidad de cada cual y en la compleja extrañeza de sus relaciones, se hubieran convertido en presencias que importunaban a Maggie. Se trataba de la primera noche que pasaban solos. La señora Rance y las Lutche llegarían al día siguiente. Pero, entre tanto, los hechos de la situación se hallaban allí ante ella, erguidos alrededor del paño verde y la lámpara de plata. Se trataba del hecho de que el amante de la esposa de su padre estuviera sentado frente a ésta; del hecho de que su padre, imperturbable y sin pestañear, se sentara entre los dos; del hecho de que Charlotte lo observara todo, alrededor de la mesa, con su marido sentado a su lado; del hecho de que Fanny Assingham, maravilloso ser, se sentara frente a los otros tres, y de que probablemente supiera más acerca de cada uno de ellos, a poco que se pensara, de lo que cada uno de ellos sabía de los demás. Y, sobre todo, erguido ante Maggie estaba el hecho de las relaciones del grupo íntegramente considerado, individual y colectivamente, con ella, de ella, falsamente alejada, por el momento, pero más presente en la mente de cada uno que la carta que debían jugar.

Sí, sometidos a esta acusación, al parecer de Maggie estaban sentados sometidos a la acusación de preguntarse, bajo la apariencia de corrección de su juego, si acaso no les estaría vigilando desde su rincón, y los tenía en su consciencia metidos a todos en un puño, como suele decirse. Por fin, Maggie se preguntó cómo podían soportarlo, aparte de que los naipes eran para ella un secreto indescifrable, incapaz de seguir el juego, por lo que se prescindía de ella en ocasiones como la presente, porque tenía la impresión de que

los jugadores se plegaban todos ellos, en gravedad y buenos modales, a los exigentes criterios imperantes en la casa. Maggie sabía que su padre era un gran aficionado al juego, uno de los más grandes, y que la ineptitud de su hija en esta materia había sido la única, aunque pequeña, desilusión que le había proporcionado; Americo jugaba con notable facilidad, igual que comprendía y practicaba cualquier arte apto para matar largos ratos de ocio; y la señora Assingham y Charlotte eran consideradas tan «buenas» como podían llegar a ser teniendo en consideración que pertenecían a un sexo incapaz de alcanzar más altas cotas. En consecuencia era evidente que los jugadores, todos en plena forma, no se limitaban meramente a matar el tiempo, tanto desde su punto de vista como desde el de Maggie, y el grado de seguridad de que gozaban o, por lo menos, al que habían llegado, representado por un tal dominio de las apariencias, era precisamente lo que excitaba los nervios de Maggie, con una especie de fuerza provocativa. Durante cinco minutos, Maggie quedó emocionada al pensar en el prodigioso efecto que podía producir si quería, hallándose como se hallaba sentada cerca de ello. Durante estos momentos de vértigo, se sintió absolutamente dominada por la fascinación que lo monstruoso produce y por la tentación que tan a menudo sentimos de estallar repentinamente a fin de no avanzar más, por el hecho de sus inexplicables idas y venidas.

Después de haber tenido vívidamente ante ella durante cierto tiempo la posibilidad de ponerse de pie, impulsada por su ofensa, dando un sobresalto a todos los jugadores, obligándoles a mirarla y a palidecer, y condenarlos a todos mediante una sola frase, una frase de fácil elección entre varias de naturaleza igualmente virulenta; después de haberse enfrentado con esta luz cegadora y de experimentar cómo la luz se transformaba en tinieblas, Maggie dejó la revista, se levantó y cruzó la estancia, pasando junto a los jugadores, no sin detenerse detrás de cada uno de ellos. Silenciosa y discreta, inclinó hacia los jugadores su cara con vaga expresión benévola, como si quisiera indicar que, a pesar de sus escasos conocimientos en la materia, les deseaba buena suerte; cada uno de ellos, alrededor de la mesa, en la compartida solemnidad, alzó la cara en expresión de reconocimiento que Maggie se llevó consigo cuando, instantes después, salió a la terraza. Su padre y su marido, la señora Assingham y Charlotte, no habían hecho más que corresponder a su mirada, sin embargo, las diferencias que mediaron entre cada uno de ellos, en este movimiento, transformaron los cuatro intercambios en cuatro diferentes comunicaciones. Y esto era tanto más maravilloso cuanto, con un secreto detrás de cada cara, todos por igual intentaron mirar a Maggie a través del tal secreto y en denegación del mismo.

Lo anterior la dejó, mientras vagaba por la terraza, con una extrañísima impresión, con la sensación transmitida con fuerza no igualada hasta el momento, de haber recibido una petición, una clara confidencia, de los cuatro pares de ojos; era una confidencia más profunda que una negación: el establecimiento de cierta clase de relación ingeniada por la propia Maggie, una relación que evitaría a cada individuo el peligro de su relación con cada uno de los demás. De esta manera, tácitamente pusieron sobre sus espaldas toda la complejidad de sus peligros, y Maggie comprendió rápidamente por qué: porque ella estaba allí, y estaba allí tal como era, para aligerarlos de sus peligros y tomarlos consigo, para cargar con ellos, al igual que el chivo expiatorio de la antigüedad —al que había visto representado en un cuadro terrible— recibía la carga de los pecados humanos, y se internaba en el desierto para desplomarse y morir bajo su peso. Sin embargo, no tenían el propósito, ni les interesaba, de que Maggie se desplomara bajo la carga de sus pecados, sino que consideraban que Maggie debía vivir, vivir en beneficio de todos, e incluso estando en su compañía tanto tiempo como le fuera posible, para demostrarles que realmente se habían liberado, y que seguiría estando allí con la finalidad de simplificar. Esta idea, la idea de su función simplificadora y de la lucha de los otros, era todavía oscura pero iba avanzando hacia el concepto de que debía adoptar, después de recibirla de ellos, y la idea dominó su mente mientras paseaba por la terraza, en donde la noche de verano era tan tibia que apenas necesitaba la protección del ligero chal que había cogido para salir. Varias de las alargadas ventanas de las estancias ocupadas estaban abiertas a la noche, de ellas salía la luz en forma de haz sin claros contornos que incidía en las viejas y pulidas losas de la terraza. No había luna ni estrellas, el aire pesado se estaba quieto; Maggie, a pesar de ir en traje de noche, no tenía motivo alguno para temer enfriarse y pudo huir, refugiándose en la oscuridad exterior, de aquella provocación nacida de la oportunidad que la había asaltado mientras se encontraba en el sofá, igual que una bestia que le saltara a la garganta.

En realidad, nada hubo más extraño que la sensación que tuvo, cuando llevaba ya algún tiempo en la terraza, al ver a sus compañeros a través de una de las ventanas, la sensación de que se sintieran casi conscientemente más seguros, y de que estuvieran agradecidos por ello. Realmente encantadores, tal como

se hallaban en la hermosa sala. Y Charlotte ciertamente, como siempre, extraordinariamente bella e incomparablemente distinguida, de modo que bien hubieran podido ser actores y actrices ensayando una obra teatral de la que la propia Maggie fuera la autora; incluso hubieran podido ser, por las felices apariencias que tenían, personajes que gracias a la fuerte nota de carácter de cada uno, dieran a cualquier autor la certidumbre del éxito, principalmente en el aspecto cómico. En breves palabras, hubieran podido representar cualquier misterio que se les antojara, y la llave que hubiera abierto y cerrado la caja, sin producir el más leve ruido, estaba en el bolsillo de Maggie o, mejor dicho, en su mano, prietamente cerrada, oprimiéndole el pecho, mientras paseaba por la terraza. Anduvo de un extremo a otro, lejos de la zona en que incidía la luz, regresó y los vio todavía en el mismo lugar en que los había dejado, dio la vuelta a la casa y miró el gran salón ahora desierto, también iluminado que parecía hablarle con su propia voz de todas las posibilidades que tenía a su disposición. Espacioso y resplandeciente, como un escenario esperando la representación de un drama, un escenario que ella podía poblar con sólo presionar su resorte, ya con serenidades, dignidades y decencias, ya con terrores, vergüenzas y ruinas; con realidades tan feas cual los informes fragmentos de la copa dorada que con tanto empeño Maggie quería recomponer.

Maggie siguió su paseo y se detuvo de nuevo para observar la sala de fumar; en esta ocasión —fue como si hubiera sido el acto de reconocimiento lo que en realidad hubiera detenido sus pasos—, vio como en un cuadro, con la tentación de la que había huido totalmente extinta, la razón que le había permitido entregarse tan poco, desde el principio, al vulgar ardor nacido de su ofensa. Mientras los contemplaba, hubiera podido echar en falta ese ardor como si se tratara de una realidad perdida; hubiera podido ansiar la directa visión vengativa, los derechos del resentimiento, las rabias de los celos, las protestas de la pasión, como si se tratara de algo que le hubieran quitado con engaños; hubiera podido ansiar aquella gama de sentimientos que tanto significan para muchas mujeres, pero que para la esposa de su marido, para la hija de su padre, sólo podía compararse, a lo sumo, con una primitiva caravana oriental que aparece a lo lejos, burdamente iluminada a la luz del sol, con altivos estandartes alzados, altas lanzas contra el cielo, todo un emocionante espectáculo, goce natural con el que mezclarse, pero que poco antes de llegar junto a Maggie se desviaba y desaparecía por otros caminos. De todas maneras, vio la razón por la que el horror en sí mismo casi había huido de ella, el horror que, presentido, la hubiera hecho gritar de dolor, por todo aquello que para ella era insólito, el horror de hallar al mal asentado a sus anchas donde sólo había soñado que podía hallarse el bien, el horror de la realidad que se encontraba detrás, detrás de todo aquello en que tanto había confiado, de todo aquello que tanto había pretendido: detrás de la nobleza, la inteligencia, la ternura. Aquélla era la primera falsedad cortante que había conocido en su vida, la primera que había tocado o por la que había sido tocada; se había enfrentado con Maggie como un extraño de rostro mal encarado sorprendido en uno de los corredores de suelo cubierto por gruesa alfombra en una casa silenciosa, el domingo por la tarde y, sin embargo, pasmosamente, ella había sido capaz de contemplar el terror y la repulsión sólo para llegar a saber que debía apartar de sí el agridulce sabor de su novedad. Desde la ventana, la visión del grupo así constituido dijo a Maggie por qué, le dijo cómo, mencionó como si lo hiciera con labios de seca pronunciación, le dio directamente a ella el nombre, de manera que tuvo que aceptarlo como si se lo hubieran espetado a la cara, de aquella otra posible relación con el hecho de que era la única que ejercía en Maggie un poder irresistible. Fue extraordinario: los miembros del grupo le hicieron comprender que albergar con respecto a ellos sentimientos de cualquier carácter inmediato, inevitable, consolador, del carácter habitualmente propio de la inocencia ultrajada y de la generosidad traicionada, representaría renunciar a ellos y que, maravillosamente, no cabía siquiera pensar en esa renuncia. Maggie en momento alguno, desde el instante en que se convenció, había renunciado a ellos en tan escasa medida como ahora; aunque invocaría, sin duda alguna como consecuencia de una decisión que adoptaría pocos minutos después, el deseo de hacerlo todavía en menor medida si fuera posible. Volvió a pasear, deteniéndose aquí y allá, y descansando en la fresca y pulida balaustrada de piedra. Poco después, pasó de nuevo ante las luces del desierto salón, y de nuevo se detuvo por lo que en él vio y sintió.

Sin embargo, esto no se concretó en un instante. La concreción fue el efecto de advertir que Charlotte estaba en medio de la estancia de pie, erguida, mirando a su alrededor, que evidentemente Charlotte acababa de entrar al salón procedente de la sala de fumar, a través de una de las salitas de paso, con la esperanza, a juzgar por las apariencias, de reunirse con su hijastra. Charlotte se había detenido al ver el gran salón desierto. Debemos tener en cuenta que Maggie había salido de la sala en que se hallaba el grupo sin ser observada. Tan definida actitud de búsqueda, por parte de aquélla, interrumpiendo la partida de bridge o modificando su curso, produjo una notable y brusca impresión en la Princesa, impresión a la que

algo en la actitud y aspecto de Charlotte, en su aires de búsqueda y propósito interrumpidos, juntamente con la intuición de sus siguientes vagos movimientos, rápidamente dio significado. Este significado consistía en que Charlotte había decidido, en que había sido infinitamente consciente de la presencia de Maggie, en que sabía que por fin la encontraría sola, y en que, por alguna razón, deseaba encontrarla con la intensidad suficiente como para recabar, así cabía presumir, la ayuda de Bob Assingham. El coronel había ocupado la silla de Charlotte en la mesa de bridge, esto constituía para Maggie una clara prueba del interés de Charlotte, de una energía que, aun cuando superficialmente común en una situación en la que no se estimaba que cada uno de los presentes vigilara a los demás, causó a nuestra joven amiga, en aquel instante, la impresión de unas rejas que se rompieran. El magnífico, esplendoroso y suave ser se encontraba fuera de la jaula, en libertad, y ahora casi grotescamente se planteó el interrogante de si aquel ser podía ser atrapado mediante algún artificio, allí donde se encontraba, antes de que se alejara más, y ser devuelto a la jaula. En este caso, el modo forzosamente hubiera tenido que consistir en cerrar rápidamente las ventanas y dar la voz de alarma. En estos instantes, la pobre Maggie tenía la sensación de que, a pesar de ignorar lo que Charlotte quería de ella, era motivo más que suficiente para alterarse el advertir que sometida a tan firmes manos cualquier cosa podía ocurrirle, para no hablar ya de las consecuencias que le reportaría emprender de nuevo la huida por la terraza, incluso al amparo de la vergüenza de la confesada debilidad que semejantes evasiones significan en el caso de una esposa ofendida. Sin embargo, ésta fue la debilidad en que la esposa ofendida incurrió, y lo único que cabe decir en su descargo es, como ella misma se dijo cuando se detuvo bruscamente, hallándose ya lejos de la casa, que supo resistir su abyección en la medida suficiente para no entrar subrepticiamente en la casa, a fin de llegar sana y salva a su aposento. Maggie se había descubierto a sí misma en el acto de huir y esconderse, y esto le reveló allí mismo, vívidamente, en una sola palabra, aquello que en todo momento había temido más.

Maggie había temido aquella concreta entrevista con Charlotte que podía decidir a la esposa de su padre a hacerle confidencias, como hasta ahora no había podido hacer, a preparar una declaración ante él en que le comunicara sus agravios, en que le expusiera la infamia de que se sospechara de ella. Esto, en el caso de que Charlotte hubiera tomado la decisión de hacerlo, se tendría que basar en un cálculo cuya consideración evocaba extrañamente otras consideraciones y otras visiones. Ello demostraría que Charlotte tenía la confianza suficiente en el dominio que sobre su marido ejercía para gozar de la seguridad de que, manteniendo a la hija a la defensiva, es decir, con la causa y la palabra de Maggie contra las suyas, no sería ésta quien se alzara con la victoria. Este vislumbre de la posible idea de Charlotte, fundada en razones que sólo ella sabía, razones de experiencia y de confianza, impenetrables para los demás, aunque íntimamente conocidas por ella; este vislumbre se ensanchó y se ensanchó rápidamente desde el instante en que fue percibido, porque si el terreno que la pareja de más edad pisaba era firme, si la belleza de las apariencias había sido tan inquebrantablemente conservada, lo único que se había roto sería, como Maggie muy bien sabía, la copa dorada. La rotura de la copa dorada no representaba menoscabo alguno en la armonía de los tres personajes triunfantes, y sólo expresaba la lamentable deformidad del comportamiento de Maggie con respecto a ellos. Desde luego, en aquellos instantes, Maggie no podía medir debidamente la diferencia que para ella comportaría lo anterior, y de manera inevitable se formó en su mente la inquietante imagen del modo en que podría esgrimirse en contra de ella el que, mediante su propia y exclusiva discreción, no pudiera convencer a Charlotte, siempre dotada de espíritu burlón, de todo lo no dicho e indecible, de todo lo constante e inconfundiblemente insinuado, en cuyo caso su padre sería invitado, sin más, a recomendar a Maggie que lo hiciera. Pero todo género de confianza, todo tipo de eficaz pretensión, que la señora Verver, gracias a sus muchos recursos innatos, pudiera seguir poseyendo y guardando en reserva, apareció súbitamente como una posible luz utilizable, y pareció ofrecer, para tratar con ella, una nueva base y algo parecido a un nuevo sistema. Maggie sintió realmente una extraña contracción del corazón al darse cuenta, en el mismo instante, de cómo tendría que ser probablemente el nuevo sistema, y se dio cuenta de ello precisamente en el instante inmediato anterior al percibir que lo que temía había ya ocurrido. Charlotte, ampliando el territorio de su búsqueda, había aparecido vagamente definida a lo lejos, de lo cual la Princesa, al cabo de un instante, tuvo la seguridad, a pesar de que la noche estaba muy oscura, por cuanto la claridad que escapaba de las ventanas de la sala de fumar no dejaba de ser una ayuda para la vista. La amiga de Maggie penetró despacio en aquel círculo, habiendo también descubierto, en estos momentos, que ésta se hallaba en la terraza. Desde el extremo de la misma vio que Charlotte se detenía ante una de las ventanas para mirar al grupo que se encontraba en el interior de la casa, y luego se acercaba más a ella y se detenía otra vez, cuando aún mediaba un considerable trecho entre las dos.

Sí, Charlotte había visto que Maggie la miraba desde lejos, se había detenido para poner a prueba la continuada atención que le prestaba. A través de la oscuridad nocturna, la cara de Charlotte estaba fijamente orientada hacia Maggie; Charlotte era el ser que, mediante la fuerza, había escapado de la jaula; sin embargo, indudablemente había en todos sus movimientos, a pesar de ser tan sólo vagamente percibidos, cierta especie de portentosa e inteligente serenidad. Había escapado animada por una intención, pero se trataba de una intención tan definida que podía acordarse con las medidas serenas. De todas maneras, las dos mujeres se limitaron a estar presentes allí durante estos primeros minutos, frente a frente, a distancia, sin intercambiar signo alguno. La intensidad de sus respectivas miradas hubiera podido perforar la noche; al fin, Maggie quedó sobresaltada por la atemorizada sensación de que había cedido ante las dudas, ante el temor y ante las vacilaciones durante un tiempo de tal duración que, sin necesidad de ulteriores pruebas, bastaba para delatarla. ¿Cuánto tiempo había estado allí mirando? ¿Un minuto?, ¿cinco? De todas formas, la duración había sido suficiente para que sintiera, de manera absoluta, que recibía de la mujer que iba a su encuentro algo que ésta le arrojaba irresistiblemente por medio del efecto del silencio, del efecto de esperar y observar, del efecto de medir la duración de sus dudas y sus temores. Si entonces, acobardada y vacilante, Maggie hubiera sacrificado, como evidentemente así parecía, todas las anteriores ficciones, Charlotte hubiera contemplado, con el inmediato conocimiento de haber adquirido ventaja, que Maggie se acercaba a ella, como en efecto se acercó. Maggie se acercó con el corazón en la mano, se acercó con la bien definida previsión, latiendo como el tic-tac de un reloj, de un destino intolerablemente duro y cortante, pero ante el que después de haberlo contemplado con los ojos abiertos de par en par había inclinado la cabeza. En el momento en que llegó al lado de Charlotte o, lo cual viene a ser lo mismo, en el momento en que Charlotte, sin un movimiento, sin una palabra, permitió que Maggie se le acercara y quedara junto a ella, su cabeza ya se encontraba en el tajo, por lo que la conciencia de que todo estaba perdido entorpeció las percepciones de Maggie, hasta el punto de que no sabía si el hacha había descendido o no. Sí, sin duda, la señora Verver tenía realmente «ventaja». ¿Y qué sensación tenía Maggie sino la de haber sido derribada de espaldas, quedando desde el primer momento con la nuca medio partida, y con la cara desamparada hacia arriba? Sólo esta posición podía explicar la mueca de dolor y de debilidad que en la cara de Maggie imprimió la dignidad de Charlotte.

—He venido para estar un rato contigo. Pensé que seguramente te encontraría aquí.

Maggie oyó su propia voz, un tanto desvaída contestando:

—Pues sí, estoy aquí.

—Hace mucho calor dentro.

—Sí, e incluso aquí.

Charlotte estaba serena y grave, incluso había pronunciado su frase referente a la temperatura con tan ponderado acento que rozaba la solemnidad. Maggie, reducida a dirigir vagamente la mirada al cielo, únicamente notaba que la firmeza del propósito de Charlotte no había menguado.

—Hay humedad en el aire, está pesado como si fuera a tronar. Me parece que tendremos tormenta.

Maggie había aventurado esta previsión para hurtarse a una sensación de inhibición, lo cual formó parte de la ventaja de Charlotte; pero la sensación de que se hallaba en una situación embarazosa no disminuyó en el silencio que se hizo a continuación. Charlotte nada contestó, tenía la frente nublada y su esbelta elegancia, su hermosa cabeza y su largo y recto cuello daban testimonio, en la semioscuridad, de su consumada perfección, de su forma noblemente erguida. Parecía que aquello para lo que Charlotte había salido hubiera ya comenzado a suceder; en consecuencia, Maggie dijo torpemente:

—¿Necesitas algo? ¿Quieres mi chal?

Con estas palabras, con la relativa pobreza de la oferta, todo comenzó a derrumbarse. La negativa de la señora Verver tuvo la brevedad propia de una advertencia de que no se hallaban juntas allí para sostener una charla ociosa, de la misma manera que la grave expresión de su rostro hasta que volvieron a caminar bien podía expresar la eficacia con que ésta veía penetrar todos sus mensajes. Echaron a andar siguiendo en sentido contrario el camino por el que Charlotte había llegado, pero ésta detuvo a Maggie, cuando se hallaban cerca de la ventana de la sala de fumar, y la obligó a que se quedara en un punto desde el que pudiera ver a los que jugaban al bridge. La una al lado de la otra contemplaron aquel cuadro de serenas armonías, durante tres o cuatro minutos, su pleno significado, como bien cabría decir, significado que no podía ser otra cosa que el resultado de la interpretación que se diera a la escena, que variaría según fuera el intérprete. Cuando Maggie contempló la escena hacía un cuarto de hora, podría haber sido algo que mostrar a Charlotte con gesto justamente irónico, y con un reproche tan severo que sólo con el silencio podía

expresarse. Pero ahora la escena se le mostraba a ella, y Charlotte era quien se la mostraba; y Maggie comprendió sin demora que tenía que someterse a aceptarla.

Los otros estaban absortos, ya jugando en silencio, ya expresando observaciones que no se oían en la terraza; al sereno rostro de su padre, que nada expresaba de cuanto estaba en la mente de su hija, dirigió primordialmente nuestra joven amiga su atención. Su esposa y su hija le observaban por igual atentamente, ¿y en cuál de las dos hubiera el señor Verver considerado más importante destruir —en defensa de su dominio del equilibrio— todo germen de inquietud? ¿A cuál de las dos hubiera respondido su mirada, de repente e impulsivamente alzada? Hasta ahora, y desde el matrimonio del señor Verver, Maggie no se había dado cuenta de una manera tan penetrante y formidable que el antiguo conocimiento que de él tenía era una realidad dividida y discutible. Ahora Maggie miraba a su padre con el permiso de Charlotte y bajo la dirección de Charlotte; en realidad lo hacía como si el concreto modo en que debía mirarlo se le hubiera ordenado, incluso como si se le hubiera prohibido mirarle de otra manera. Maggie comprendió que no estaba al servicio del interés y de la protección del señor Verver, sino, de manera insistente y opresiva, en los de Charlotte, al servicio de la seguridad de ésta y a cualquier precio. Mediante esta muda demostración, casi parecía que Charlotte indicara el precio a Maggie, lo indicara como si se tratara de un asunto de la competencia de Maggie y mencionara una suma de dinero que en justicia debía conseguir. Charlotte tenía que conservar su seguridad, Maggie tenía que pagar, siendo el precio el aspecto que a ésta incumbía.

Con más claridad que en cualquier momento anterior, la Princesa volvió a tener conciencia de que todo lo cargaban sobre sus espaldas, y hubo un momento, un instante supremo, en el que sintió arder en sí el loco deseo de que su padre alzara la vista. El deseo latió durante estos segundos como una angustiada llamada a su padre, y Maggie osaría dirigirle esta llamada, si su padre alzaba la vista y las veía a las dos allí, de pie, a través del espacio que mediaba en la oscuridad exterior. Entonces su padre quedaría impresionado por aquella imagen y comprendería a las dos, tal como eran, y podría dar un signo —Maggie no sabía cuál—, signo que la salvara, que la salvara de ser quien tuviera que pagarlo todo. Su padre podía dar muestras de una preferencia, efectuar una distinción entre ellas dos, podía, incluso por piedad, indicar a Maggie que la intensidad de su esfuerzo en su beneficio era más de lo que deseaba. Esto representaba la única laguna en la coherencia de Maggie, la única desviación del curso general de sus proyectos. Pero un instante después nada quedaba de esto porque nuestro buen hombre no movió los ojos; la mano de Charlotte cogió prestamente el brazo de Maggie y, con firmeza, la apartó del lugar en que se hallaban, como si Charlotte, en igual y súbita percepción hubiera advertido que la impresión recibida por las dos podía afectarlas en más de una manera. Volvieron sobre sus pasos a lo largo del resto de la terraza, doblaron la esquina de la casa, y juntas llegaron ante las ventanas del pomposo salón, todavía iluminado y desierto. Allí Charlotte volvió a detenerse; una vez más causó la impresión de indicar a Maggie lo que ésta había observado por sí misma: el aspecto que la estancia tenía en su silencio, como de haber sido dispuesta, con sus grandes objetos ordenados y equilibrados, para una solemne recepción, para celebrar en ella una importante transacción o un auténtico acto oficial. Ante esta imagen Charlotte de nuevo se colocó frente a su amiga, buscando en su rostro los efectos de todo lo que ya le había comunicado y, con la misma eficacia, puso de relieve que la terraza y la inexpresiva noche no eran los testigos adecuados para la total expresión de su idea. Poco después, ya en el interior del salón, bajo los antiguos esplendores venecianos y bajo la mirada de varios grandes retratos más o menos contemporáneos de aquellos que aguardaban en las paredes de Fawns su última y más lejana emigración, Maggie se halló en trance de contemplar, y al principio con el aliento cortado, el total formado por cada una de las peticiones que por separado la señora Verver le había formulado hasta el momento, fuera cual fuese la forma en que las había manifestado.

—He estado esperando durante quizá más tiempo del que tú crees, para hacerte una pregunta que hasta el momento no he tenido ocasión que me haya parecido tan buena como ésta para formulártela. Quizá habría sido más fácil si me hubieras causado la impresión de estar dispuesta siquiera levemente a ofrecérmela. Como puedes ver, no me ha quedado más remedio que aprovechar la oportunidad tal como el azar me la ha deparado.

Estaban las dos en el centro de la inmensa estancia y Maggie tenía la impresión de que el escenario que su imaginación había visto vacío hacía veinte minutos estaba ahora suficientemente poblado. Aquellas breves y directas palabras de Charlotte habían llenado el escenario hasta sus últimos rincones, y nada se hallaba ausente de la conciencia de Maggie, ni siquiera el papel que debía interpretar. Charlotte había entrado directamente en la sala; allí se alzaba hermosa y libre, con actitud y aspecto armónicos con la firmeza de las palabras pronunciadas. Maggie había conservado el chal con el que había salido y,

agarrándolo nerviosa y prietamente, se arrebujó en él como si buscara cobijo, como llevada por un sentimiento de humildad. Causaba la impresión de mirar al exterior desde una improvisada pañoleta, prenda de cabeza de mujer pobre, ante la puerta de un palacio; e incluso esperaba igual que la pobre mujer, y su mirada se fijó en los ojos de su amiga con una expresión de reconocimiento que no pudo reprimir. Hablaría como pudiera:

—¿De qué pregunta se trata?

Pero todo en Maggie, de la cabeza a los pies, decía a gritos que ya lo sabía. Y también sabía que daba muestras clarísimas de saberlo. La causa de la eficaz vaguedad, para salvar los últimos vestigios de dignidad de la eminente derrota, era ya una causa perdida; lo único que Maggie podía hacer a toda costa, caso de que fuera posible incluso a costa de comportarse con estúpida inconsecuencia, era esforzarse en causar la impresión de no estar atemorizada. Si conseguía no parecer atemorizada podría quizá causar la leve impresión de no estar avergonzada, es decir, no estar avergonzada de estar atemorizada, que era la clase de vergüenza que se le podía atribuir, porque era el miedo lo que en todo momento decidía sus actos. De todas maneras, su resistencia, su pasmo, su terror, la superficie vacía o borrosa, o lo que fuera, que ahora Maggie presentaba, se transformó en una mezcla de realidad carente de significado. A la crecida ventaja que ahora sostenía y amparaba a Charlotte, las siguientes palabras poco añadieron:

—¿Te he dado algún motivo de queja? ¿Consideras que te he ofendido de alguna manera? Ha llegado el momento en que creo tener derecho a preguntártelo.

Sus miradas se encontraron, largo rato. Por lo menos la mirada de Maggie evitó la vergüenza de rehuir la de Charlotte:

—¿Qué te induce a hacerme esta pregunta?

—Mi natural deseo de saber. Durante largo tiempo, muy en poco lo has tenido.

Maggie esperó unos instantes antes de preguntar:

—¿Durante largo tiempo? ¿Quieres decir que has pensado…?

—Quiero decir, querida, que he visto. Semana tras semana, he visto que tú parecías pensar… algo que te preocupaba y te tenía perpleja. ¿Soy culpable de algo, en algún grado?

Maggie reunió todas sus fuerzas:

—¿Y qué puede ser?

—No soy yo quien debe imaginarlo, y lamentaría mucho tener que intentar decirlo. No veo aspecto en el que pueda haberte ofendido; tampoco veo en qué he ofendido a cualquier otra persona en quien yo pueda suponerte suficientemente interesada. Si alguna falta he cometido, la habré cometido inconscientemente; espero con ansia que me digas cuál es, con toda franqueza. Ahora bien, si estoy equivocada en lo que ahora te estoy diciendo, referente a esa diferencia cada vez más marcada, a mi parecer, en el trato que me das, tanto mejor. De ninguna otra manera más satisfactoria que ésta puedes corregirme.

Maggie advirtió que Charlotte hablaba con extraordinaria y siempre creciente tranquilidad, como si escucharse a sí misma, además de percatarse del modo en que era escuchada, la ayudara a pasar de un punto a otro. Charlotte se daba cuenta de que se comportaba como debía, que este era el tono que debía adoptar y que esto era lo que tenía que hacer, que estaba haciendo aquello que en sus dilaciones e incertidumbres estimaba había con anterioridad exagerado en gran manera las dificultades. Pocas eran las dificultades, e iban menguando a medida que su contrincante iba encogiéndose más y más. Charlotte no sólo hacía lo que había querido hacer, sino que en estos momentos ya lo había hecho y lo había dejado debidamente asentado. Todo esto únicamente produjo el efecto de ahondar en Maggie la sensación de la penetrante y sencilla necesidad de seguir el coloquio hasta el final. Poco faltó para que la Princesa tartamudeara al decir:

—¿«Si» estás equivocada, dices? Realmente, lo has estado.

Charlotte miró a Maggie con dureza:

—¿Estás absolutamente segura de que todo ha sido una equivocación mía?

—Sólo puedo decir que te has formado una falsa impresión.

—En ese caso, tanto mejor; si realmente recibí una falsa impresión, en el momento en que la recibí supe que tarde o temprano la manifestaría, porque ésta es sistemáticamente mi manera de comportarme.

Después de un silencio, Charlotte añadió:

—Gracias a lo que acabas de decir, me alegra haber hablado. Muchas gracias.

Fue extraño que estas palabras significaran que también para Maggie las dificultades comenzaran a menguar. El hecho de que Charlotte aceptara su denegación fue para Maggie como una general promesa de

no empeorar la situación en que se encontraba más de lo que fuera esencialmente necesario, y ello ayudó positivamente a construir su falsedad, a la que ahora, en consecuencia, añadió una nueva piedra:

—No cabe duda de que te he causado, de modo totalmente accidental, una impresión de la que en todo momento he sido ignorante. En momento alguno he considerado que me hayas ofendido.

Charlotte le preguntó:

—¿Y cómo es posible que yo llegara siquiera a acercarme a semejante posibilidad?

Maggie tenía la vista fija en Charlotte ahora con más tranquilidad, y ni siquiera intentó dar respuesta a esta pregunta. Al cabo de unos instantes, dijo algo que era más armónico con la situación en que actualmente se hallaban las dos:

—De nada te acuso.

—¡No sabes cuánto me alegro!

Charlotte había pronunciado estas palabras con énfasis, casi con verdadera alegría. Y para proseguir Maggie tuvo que pensar, con la intensidad que le era propia, en Americo; tuvo que pensar en que el Príncipe, por su parte, también había tenido que mentir a Charlotte, y que lo había hecho en beneficio de su esposa, y que al hacerlo le había dado a ella la pauta y el ejemplo. Sin duda Americo tuvo sus dificultades para hacerlo y ahora, a fin de cuentas, Maggie quedaba a su altura. En realidad era como si, gracias a su evocación de la imagen de Americo enfrentándose con aquel admirable ser, incluso mientras se enfrentaba ahora con ella, cayera sobre ésta el resplandor lejano, fuerte y directo de una profunda luz reveladora que iluminaba hasta la última pulgada del territorio en que se hallaba. Americo había dado a Maggie algo con lo que actuar en concordancia y ésta no había cometido la tontería de revolverse contra su marido y no actuar en consecuencia. Por esto los dos, Americo y Maggie, estaban juntos, juntos y muy cerca el uno del otro, en tanto que Charlotte, alzándose radiante ante Maggie, se hallaba en un espacio oscuro que le aislaría en la soledad y la atormentaría con preocupaciones. Por esto el corazón de la Princesa se esponjó a pesar de su tensión, porque había actuado de acuerdo con lo que era pertinente, y algo que bien podía ser como una rara flor arrancada de un importante parterre, surgiría, y posiblemente pronto. Sí, lo correcto adquiría, al fin, la extraordinaria forma de la charlatanería, como ella la llamaba, de Maggie. Todo consistía en no desviarse ni siquiera un ápice y penetrar en el terreno de la verdad. De ahí que Maggie quedara en sumo dominio de sí misma y dijera:

—Te digo muy de veras que tus preocupaciones se basan en una falsa impresión. Debes creerme y dar por seguro que jamás he llegado a imaginar que tú pudieras causarme daño.

De una manera maravillosa Maggie siguió en el mismo tono y, más aún, en tono mejorado:

—Debes creerme y pensar que siempre te he considerado un ser bello, bueno y maravilloso, y sólo eso. A mi parecer, tienes todo género de derechos a que así te considere.

Charlotte la miró en silencio. Necesitaba más, necesitaba la última palabra, aunque sin faltar, al pedirla, a las normas del tacto:

—Querida, esto es mucho más de lo que jamás hubiera soñado pedirte. Sólo quería tu denegación.

—Pues ya la tienes.

—¿Por tu honor?

—Por mi honor.

Y nuestra joven amiga incluso tuvo el gesto de no dar media vuelta e irse. Había relajado la presión con que sus manos agarraban el chal que había deslizado hacia atrás, y seguía allí en espera de cuanto pudiera ocurrir, en espera de quedar liberada de toda carga. En este momento, Maggie vio qué era lo que se avecinaba. Lo vio en el rostro de Charlotte, y lo sintió creando en el aire que mediaba entre las dos una fría zona que dio culminación a la frialdad de sus conscientes perjurios. Charlotte dijo:

—¿Me darás un beso para sellar lo que has dicho?

Maggie no podía decir que sí, pero tampoco dijo que no. Sin embargo, lo que ayudó a Maggie en su pasividad fue percatarse de lo muy lejos que Charlotte había llegado en su retirada. Pero también ocurrió algo diferente, algo que mientras Maggie recibía el beso prodigioso en la mejilla, tuvo la oportunidad de vivir. Se trataba de la visión de los otros que, habiéndose levantado de la mesa de juego y dejadas las cartas para reunirse con los restantes miembros del grupo, habían llegado a la puerta abierta de la estancia, y se habían detenido bruscamente al ver aquella demostración evidentemente a ellos destinada. El marido y el padre de Maggie iban en vanguardia; el abrazo de Charlotte, que ellos no podían distinguir del abrazo de Maggie a Charlotte, a juicio de la primera, adquirió con su llegada gran publicidad.

Capítulo XXXVII

Tres días después el padre de Maggie le preguntó a ésta, durante unos momentos de calma, qué impresión le habían causado, en ocasión de su reaparición y de su quizá más intensa fruición, Dotty, Kitty y la otrora temible señora Rance; la consecuencia de esta pregunta fue, para la pareja, otro paseo juntos, alejándose del resto del grupo; fue un paseo por el parque similar al que los dos dieran en ocasión de la anterior visita de esta amigas, a la sazón más inquietantes que ahora: fue la ocasión de la larga charla, en un banco, bajo la copa de uno de los grandes árboles. En ella se planteó aquel tema, en aquel momento de indefinibles consecuencias, que, en los momentos de ocio compartido, Maggie tenía la costumbre de calificar de «primer inicio» de la presente situación. De esta manera la rueda del tiempo les había ofrecido la oportunidad, al hallarse los dos solos mientras se reunían para tomar el té en la terraza, de obedecer al mismo raro impulso de «soltarse», como el propio Adam Verver dijo en familiar expresión, mientras allá se dirigían. Este impulso había producido sus frutos, a su manera, desde antiguo desde que produjo sus frutos en la lejana tarde otoñal dando filo a aquella crisis tan superada ya desde entonces. Bien hubiera podido parecer gracioso a los dos que ahora la presencia de la señora Rance y de las Lutche —que en aquel entonces presentaban síntomas no tan notorios— hubiera significado otrora una crisis para las ansiedades y la prudencia del padre y de la hija; hubiera podido ser gracioso que estas señoras hubieran representado en la imaginación de padre e hija un símbolo de peligros tan vívidos que precipitaran la necesidad de un remedio. Padre e hija estaban plenamente dispuestos ahora a sacar semejante diversión de sus presentes impresiones; ambos habían hallado durante los pasados meses, a juicio de Maggie, un recurso y un alivio al hablar, con cierta aproximación a la intensidad, cuando se reunían con toda aquella gente en la que en realidad no pensaban; la gente que casi había comenzado a atestar su vivir y que, en la actualidad, los dos se ocuparon de los espectros del pasado, como se permitían calificar a las tres damas, imitando el goce del desarrollo del tema mejor de lo que habían conseguido imitar durante la estancia en la casa, por ejemplo, de los Castledean. Éstos constituían una broma nueva, relativamente nueva, y ellos dos, siempre a juicio de Maggie, habían tenido que aprender de qué iba; en tanto que las personas de Detroit, y de Providence, precisamente por proceder de Providence y por proceder de Detroit, eran una broma antigua y de amplio alcance, de la que se podía sacar el máximo partido, y en la que se podía hacer humorística insistencia.

Además, intenso, y súbito había sido esta tarde el casi confesado deseo de descansar los dos juntos un poco, como si a ello les impulsara una tensión durante largo tiempo experimentada, aunque jamás mencionada, de descansar hombro con hombro, la mano en la mano, y la mirada ansiosa en la mirada ansiosa —¿quién lo expresó así?— liberados de fatigas y protegidos de tal manera que la debilidad de los dos no pudiera ser descubierta por la otra pareja. Dicho en pocas palabras: era como si realmente la felicidad interior de ser una vez más, aunque quizá sólo por media hora, sencillamente padre e hija, se les hubiera presentado resplandeciente, y hubieran escogido el pretexto que más fácilmente podía convertirla en realidad. Eran marido y mujer —¡intensamente!— con respecto a otras personas, pero tan pronto se hubieron sentado en el viejo banco, conscientes de que el grupo reunido en la terraza, aumentado con la presencia de unos vecinos, al igual que en el pasado, se divertiría sin necesidad de que ellos estuvieran presentes, se sintieron ambos maravillosamente bien, como si se hubieran embarcado en una barquichuela y remando se hubieran alejado de la playa, en donde maridos y esposas y retorcidas complicaciones daban al

aire la sensación de una naturaleza en exceso tropical. En la barquichuela eran padre e hija, y las pobres Dotty y Kitty representaban, para padre e hija, los remos o la vela. Y siendo así, ¿por qué razón pensó Maggie, no podían vivir siempre, mientras los dos vivieran, juntos en una barquichuela? Al formularse esta pregunta, sintió en el rostro el soplo de una posibilidad que la tranquilizó: les bastaba con conocerse el uno al otro, a partir de ahora, en cuanto personas sin relación de matrimonio con otras. En aquella deliciosa tarde, anterior en el mismo lugar, el señor Verver estaba tan lejos de estar casado como se pueda estar, lo cual reducía, y valga la expresión, la cuantía del cambio de uno y otra. A fin de cuentas siempre, pasara lo que pasara, se tenían el uno al otro; ésta era la verdad redentora y el tesoro oculto para hacer exactamente lo que quisieran, lo que representaba una gran reserva de posibilidades.

¿Y quién podía decir que, gracias a esto, no podían llegar a hacerlo los dos, antes de llegar al fin?

Entretanto, los dos juntos habían seguido en el dorado aire, hacia las seis de la tarde de aquel día de julio que envolvía los densos bosques de Kent, el desarrollo de varias facetas de la evolución de las antiguas compañeras de juego de Maggie, al parecer todavía atraídas por ideales de imposible alcance, regresando al otro lado del océano, a sus nativas sedes, para proceder a la renovación de su —difícil era darle nombre— equipo moral, económico y de conversación, y reapareciendo una y otra vez como una tribu de judías errantes. Sin embargo, nuestra pareja agotó por fin el estudio de estos anales, y al cabo de unos instantes de silencio, Maggie se dispuso a abordar un tema diferente o, por lo menos, un tema cuya inmediata relación con el anterior no era, a primera vista, evidente. Maggie así lo hizo:

—¿Te has reído de mí cuando hace un momento me he preguntado por qué podía la otra gente desear luchar?

Hizo una pausa y añadió, con cierta ansiedad, la siguiente pregunta:

—¿Me has considerado…, bueno…, en fin…, fatua?

El señor Verver pareció un tanto desorientado:

—¿Fatua?

—Quería decir sublime en nuestra felicidad, como si lo contemplara todo desde una alta cima. 0, mejor dicho, sublime en nuestra general posición.

Había hablado como llevada por el hábito de mantener su conciencia en estado de ansiedad, como si algo la predispusiera a menudo a saber con seguridad, en vista a su comercio con los humanos, el «estado» de los libros de contabilidad del espíritu. Maggie explicó:

—Te lo pregunto porque no quiero quedar cegada o convertirme en altanera, llevada por determinada conciencia de hallarme en esta o aquella situación social.

El padre de Maggie escuchó esta declaración como si las preocupaciones de la bondad de su hija todavía pudieran, al mostrarse, constituir sorpresa para él, por no hablar ya del encanto que su delicadeza y belleza en él producían. Parecía que el señor Verver, conmovido, deseara ver hasta qué punto quería llegar su hija y a qué punto realmente llegaba. Pero Maggie esperó un poco, como si precisamente percatarse de lo muy pendiente que su padre estaba de lo que ella se disponía a decir la pusiera nerviosa. Los dos estaban evitando cuanto fuera serio, se mantenían ansiosamente al margen de cuanto fuera real, y volvían a adoptar, una y otra vez, como si con ello quisieran ocultar su cautela, el tono de la recordada ocasión de la anterior charla, en la que ambos compartieron el mismo refugio.

Maggie prosiguió:

—¿Te acuerdas de que cuando estuvieron aquí te dije que dudaba que nosotros lo hubiéramos alcanzado?

El señor Verver hizo cuanto pudo para recordar:

—¿Que hubiéramos alcanzado una situación social, quieres decir?

—Sí, después de que Fanny Assingham me dijera por vez primera que si seguíamos llevando la misma vida nunca la tendríamos.

—Lo cual fue lo que nos puso sobre la pista de Charlotte.

Sí, habían comentado aquello tan a menudo que poco le costaba al señor Verver acordarse.

Maggie hizo otra pausa, dándose cuenta de que su padre podía afirmar y reconocer, sin rebozo alguno, que en aquel momento crítico se habían puesto sobre la pista de Charlotte. Era como si este reconocimiento hubiera sido calificado por los dos de fundamental a fin de examinar honradamente los logros de su vivir. Maggie prosiguió:

—Pues bien, de Kitty y Dotty todavía recuerdo que si en aquel entonces hubiéramos estado más «situados», o como sea que se llame eso que ahora somos, no habría sino una excusa para preguntarme a

santo de qué los demás no podían hacerme sentir más importante por tener ellos ideas más mezquinas. Sí, porque ésta era la sensación que solíamos tener.

Con cierto aire filosófico, el señor Verver repuso:

—Sí, recuerdo las sensaciones que, por lo general, teníamos.

Maggie causó la impresión de desear defender un poco aquellas sensaciones, recordando tiernamente el pasado:

—Era muy duro vivir sin afectos en el corazón, cuando realmente teníamos una posición social. Pero resultaba todavía peor que nos creyéramos sublimes, cuando, tal como temía y tal como incluso ahora temo, no había un sentimiento que diera apoyo a semejante creencia.

Y Maggie volvió a dar muestras de aquellas ansias que ahora consideraba superadas. Y por estas ansias que sin duda seguían siendo el peligro que a menudo la acechaba, siguió hablando en tono casi sentencioso:

—En todo caso, es preciso siempre prestar atención al estado anímico de los demás, a lo que quizá echen en falta, a aquello de lo que quizá se sientan privados.

Después de una pausa, añadió:

—Sin embargo, Kitty y Dotty no podían imaginar que nosotros nos sintiéramos privados de algo. Y ahora, ahora…

Pero Maggie interrumpió la frase como si quisiera expresar su benevolencia hacia el pasmo y la envidia de las dos jóvenes. Maggie pronunció la frase completa:

—Y ahora ven, con mayor claridad todavía, que es posible que lo tengamos todo y lo conservemos todo, sin ser orgullosos.

Al cabo de unos instantes, Maggie prosiguió:

—No, no somos orgullosos, incluso pienso que quizá seamos menos orgullosos de lo que debiéramos ser.

Pero en el mismo instante Maggie pasó a otro tema. Aunque sólo pudo hacerlo volviendo a hablar de lo ya hablado, como si le fascinara. Causó la impresión de desear, inducida por esa renovada y ahora todavía más sugerente idea, conservar a su padre junto a ella, a fin de remontar la corriente del tiempo y hundirse, en la suavidad del agua, en el contraído lago del pasado:

—Hablábamos de esto, sí, hablábamos, y tú no lo recuerdas tan bien como yo. Tú también dudabas, y era bonito que dudases. Al igual que Kitty y Dotty, también tú creías que teníamos una posición; quedaste sorprendido cuando yo dije que creía que debíamos decirles que no estábamos haciendo en su beneficio lo que ellas suponían.

Maggie calló unos instantes y siguió:

—En realidad, ni siquiera ahora lo estamos haciendo. Realmente, no las estamos introduciendo. No, no las presentamos a las personas que debiéramos.

—En este caso, ¿cómo juzgas a las personas con quien ahora están tomando el té?

Estas palabras motivaron que Maggie repusiera muy vivamente:

—¡Exactamente esto mismo me preguntaste la otra vez, un día en que teníamos a no sé quién en casa! Y te contesté que jamás juzgaba a nadie.

—Recuerdo que las personas a las que de tan buen grado dimos la bienvenida no «contaban». A Fanny Assingham le constaba que así era.

Su hija había despertado el eco, y allí en el banco, al igual que en la anterior ocasión, el señor Verver efectuó afirmativos movimientos con la cabeza, y meneó nerviosamente un pie. Dijo:

—Sí, sí, la gente que teníamos en casa sólo tenía categoría suficiente para nosotros. Recuerdo muy bien que era así.

Maggie asintió:

—Así fue, así fue.

Luego añadió:

—Y me preguntaste si, a mi juicio, no debíamos decírselo. Quiero decir, principalmente a la señora Rance, que la habíamos invitado engañándola.

—Exactamente, pero tú dijiste que la señora Rance no lo comprendería.

—A lo que tú contestaste que, en este caso, tú eras igual que ella. Tú no lo comprendías.

—No, no… Pero recuerdo que cuando, en tu bendita inocencia, dijiste que carecíamos de posición, diste una explicación que me hizo cisco. Dando muestras de deleite, Maggie dijo:

—Pues ahora te volveré a hacer cisco. Te dije que tú, por ti mismo, tenías una posición sin la menor duda. Tú no eras como yo; tenías la posición que siempre habías tenido.

Mostrándose de acuerdo, el señor Verver recordó:

—Y entonces te pregunté por qué tú no tenías mi posición. —Efectivamente.

Con sus anteriores palabras, el señor Verver había conseguido que su hija orientara el rostro hacia él, y en esta postura siguió Maggie envolviéndole con su cálido esplendor, efecto de la comprobada verdad de que los dos, al hablar, podían volver a vivir juntos. Maggie dijo:

—Y yo contesté que había perdido mi posición al contraer matrimonio. Y que aquella posición, recuerdo muy bien mi manera de pensar a la sazón, jamás la recuperaría. Le había hecho yo algo a aquella posición, aunque no sabía qué. Había renunciado a ella y, sin embargo, como se pudo ver entonces, no había conseguido compensación alguna por ello. Nuestra querida Fanny siempre me había asegurado que podía conseguirla, pero para ello tenía que despertar. Por esto intentaba despertar, lo intentaba con todas mis fuerzas.

—Sí, y hasta cierto punto lo conseguiste, y también conseguiste despertarme a mí. Pero diste gran importancia a la dificultad con que te tropezabas para conseguirlo.

Y el señor Verver añadió estas palabras:

—Es el único caso que recuerdo, Mag, en que has dado importancia a una dificultad.

Maggie le miró en silencio durante unos instantes, y dijo:

—¿La dificultad de ser muy feliz?

—Sí, ésa.

Maggie le recordó:

—Bueno, tú dijiste que era una buena dificultad. Confesaste que nuestra vida tenía todas las apariencias de ser bella.

El señor Verver pensó unos instantes y dijo:

—Sí, es muy posible que lo confesara; así me lo parecía.

Pero, protegiéndose con su leve y fácil sonrisa, el señor Verver preguntó:

—¿Y qué pretendes decirme con eso?

—Sólo que a menudo dudábamos; que, en aquel entonces, solíamos preguntarnos si nuestra manera de vivir no era un poco egoísta.

También esto fue objeto de la reflexión, con mucha calma, del señor Verver:

—¿Debido a que así lo creía Fanny Assingham?

—No, no; Fanny jamás pensó semejante cosa. Es incapaz de tener esa clase de pensamientos. A lo sumo, en algunas ocasiones, piensa que la gente es insensata.

Maggie explicó estas palabras:

—Fanny nunca piensa que la gente sea mala, mala en el sentido de malvada.

A lo cual la Princesa se aventuró a añadir:

—A Fanny no le importa que la gente sea malvada. El señor Verver dijo:

—Comprendo, comprendo.

Sin embargo, a juzgar por las palabras que el señor Verver dijo a continuación, su hija estimó que en realidad no comprendía tanto como había afirmado:

—En este caso, ¿Fanny sólo nos considera insensatos?

—No, no he dicho eso. Estaba hablando de nuestro egoísmo.

—¿Y esto pertenece al capítulo de maldad que Fanny condena?

Estas palabras provocaron los escrúpulos de Maggie que repuso:

—¡No digo que Fanny *condone*! Además, estaba hablando de antes.

Sin embargo, al cabo de unos instantes el padre de Maggie demostró que había hecho caso omiso de este matiz, y que sus pensamientos seguían en el mismo punto. En tono de reflexión, el señor Verver dijo:

—Oye Mag, yo no soy egoísta. No, ni hablar.

Pues buen, si su padre era capaz de hablar de esto, también Maggie podía dar su opinión al respecto:

—Pues yo sí.

Adam Verver, que en momentos de suma sinceridad volvía a expresarse con la libertad de otros tiempos, dijo:

—Y un cuerno. Creeré que eres egoísta el día que Americo se queje de ti.

—¡Es que mi egoísmo consiste en él! Soy egoísta de él, valga la expresión.

Maggie hizo una pausa y prosiguió:

—Quiero decir que Americo es mi motivo para todo.

Por propia experiencia, su padre podía muy bien imaginar lo que Maggie quería decir:

—¿Es que una muchacha no tiene derecho a ser egoísta de su marido?

Sin contestar la pregunta, Maggie observó:

—No quería decir que soy celosa. En ese aspecto, el mérito es de Americo y no mío.

Estas palabras parecieron divertidas al señor Verver. Dijo.

—¿De lo contrario, podrías serlo?

—¿Cómo puedo hablar de «lo contrario»? Afortunadamente para mí, no es ése el caso.

Siguiendo el curso de sus pensamientos, añadió:

—Si todo fuera diferente, todo sería naturalmente diferente.

Y como si estas palabras sólo fueran la mitad de lo que quería decir, Maggie prosiguió:

—A mi parecer, cuando una ama sólo un poco, es natural que sólo sea un poco celosa, o que no sea celosa. Pero cuando una ama de una manera más profunda e intensa, una es celosa en la misma proporción; entonces, los celos tienen intensidad y, sin duda alguna, ferocidad. Sin embargo, cuando una ama de la forma más profunda e indecible, se está por encima de todo y nada hay que pueda hacerla a una descender.

El señor Verver había escuchado como si nada tuviera que oponer a tan elevados conceptos. Preguntó:

—¿Y tú amas de esta última manera?

Durante unos instantes, Maggie no pudo hablar; por fin, repuso:

—Bueno, es que no se trata de hablar de este tema. Sin embargo, te diré que me siento por encima de todo.

A lo que Maggie añadió, dando un giro alegre a sus palabras:

—Y, en consecuencia, me atrevo a decir que muy a menudo sé en qué situación estoy.

El leve y bello pulso de la pasión en estas palabras, la insinuación de la presencia de un ser flotando y resplandeciente en un cálido criar de verano, cierta sugerencia de deslumbrante zafiro y plata, de un ser acunado en profundidades, boyante entre peligros, en el que era imposible el temor o la locura, y que sólo por juego podía hundirse, algo de todo esto fue lo que probablemente dio de nuevo conciencia al señor Verver, manifestada mediante su discreto y casi tímido asentimiento de que Maggie era con seguridad capaz de gozar de unos éxtasis que en sus buenos tiempos él probablemente a pocas personas había sido capaz de convencer que pudiera experimentar o proporcionar. El señor Verver estuvo en silencio, sentado allí durante un rato, casi como si le hubieran mandado callar, casi como si le hubieran amonestado, y no por primera vez; sin embargo, parecía ser efecto de que le hubieran recordado antes lo que había salido ganando que lo que había salido perdiendo. Además, ¿quién, salvo él, sabía realmente lo que no había conseguido e incluso lo que había conseguido? De todas maneras, lo más hermoso de la condición de Maggie consistía en hacer que el señor Verver se sintiera ante un mar que, a pesar de que sus personales buceos en él habían terminado, resplandecía ante su vista, en tanto que el aire y la espuma y el juego constituían también para él una sensación. No, no dejaba de experimentar esta sensación, y si el señor Verver no flotaba personalmente, si ni siquiera estaba sentado en la playa, mal podía decirse que respiraba aquella dicha, comunicada de manera irresistible, y que sintiera aquel aroma. Además, también podía decirse que le constaba que sin él nada de todo eso hubiera sido posible, lo cual quizá fuera lo que menos le importaba. Por fin, el señor Verver observó:

—Me parece que nunca he tenido celos.

Y el señor Verver pudo percatarse de que estas palabras tuvieron para Maggie un significado mayor que el que quiso darles, ya que indujeron a Maggie, como impulsada por un resorte, a dirigirle una mirada que parecía expresar cosas que no podía decir.

Pero, por fin, Maggie intentó decir una de ellas:

—Tú, papá, eres quien se encuentra por encima de todas las cosas, nada puede hacerte descender.

El señor Verver devolvió la mirada que le dirigía su hija, con la expresión de sociabilidad propia de su fácil comunión, pero esta vez no sin cierto matiz de solemnidad. Parecía que percibiera cosas que decir, y otras que, por ser de carácter presuntuoso o por diferentes razones, más valía callar. Por lo tanto, el señor Verver decidió decir lo más evidente:

—En ese caso formamos una buena pareja. No podemos quejarnos.

—¡No, no podemos quejarnos!

Declaración que fue formulada no sólo con todo el énfasis, sino que la confirmó poniéndose en pie con decisión, y quedándose en pie como si la finalidad que había motivado su paseo se hubiera alcanzado ya. Sin embargo, en el momento de cruzar la barra marítima o de entrar en puerto, ocurrió lo único que podía

asemejarse a la revelación de que habían tenido que navegar contra viento y marea. El señor Verver se quedó sentado, de manera que parecía que Maggie se le hubiera adelantado y en espera de que su compañero la alcanzara. Si no podían quejarse, no podían quejarse; sin embargo, el señor Verver parecía dudar, como si esperase más palabras. Su mirada se encontró con la sugerente de Maggie, y sólo después de que se hubiera limitado con sencillez a sonreír a su padre, a sonreírle fijamente, éste habló para decir lo que de importancia quedaba por decir, desde el banco en donde se había reclinado, alzando la cara hacia su hija, extendidas las piernas con aire un tanto fatigado, y ambas manos apoyadas en el asiento. Habían navegado contra viento y marea, y Maggie estaba aún descansada. Habían navegado contra viento y marea y el señor Verver era el navío más zarandeado, por lo que quizá diera muestras de fatiga, rezagándose. Pero aquel silencio fue como si Maggie hiciera una seña al señor Verver invitándole a ponerse a su altura; él casi había llegado junto a ella cuando, al cabo de un minuto, halló las palabras que debía decir:

—¡Lo único malo es que no estoy dispuesto a aguantar otra vez que pretendas que eres egoísta!

Maggie decidió ayudar a su padre:

—¿No me lo tolerarás?

—No te lo toleraré.

—Lo comprendo, es tu manera de ser. No tiene importancia, sólo demuestra… Pero lo que demuestra también carece de importancia.

Maggie calló, y acto seguido declaró:

—De todas maneras, en estos momentos estoy rebosando egoísmo.

El señor Verver contempló con la misma expresión a su hija durante un rato más. De una manera extraña parecía que gracias a este brusco silencio, gracias a su aceptación de lo no dicho o, por lo menos, a la referencia a ello, los dos hubieran dejado prácticamente de fingir, y se dirigieran directamente al «asunto», a algo que habían estado inefablemente evitando, porque les producía un temor que era como una seducción, de la misma manera que todo género de confesión del temor representaba una alusión. En este momento, Maggie tuvo la impresión de que su padre se lanzara abiertamente por el camino que le había tentado:

—Cuando una persona es como tú has dicho, siempre hay otras personas que sufren por ello. Y tú me acabas de decir hace poco todo lo que serías capaz de tolerar a tu marido, si se diera el caso.

—¡No me refería a mi marido!

—¿A quién te referías, pues?

Las protestas y las preguntas motivadas por ella se sucedieron con más rapidez que todas las frases anteriormente intercambiadas, y se sucedieron, por parte de Maggie, por un momentáneo estado de desaliento. Pero ésta no estaba dispuesta rehuir la situación, y mientras su padre la miraba, mientras Maggie se preguntaba si su padre esperaba que le diera el nombre de su esposa, con total hipocresía, como el de la persona que pagaba por la dicha de su hija, se le ocurrió algo mucho mejor.

—Me refería a ti.

—¿Quieres decir que yo he sido tu víctima?

—Naturalmente, tú has sido mi víctima. ¿Qué has hecho en tu vida que no haya sido en mi beneficio?

—Muchas cosas, más de las que podría decirte, cosas que puedes averiguar por ti misma con sólo pensar un poco. Piensa en todo lo que he hecho en mi pronto beneficio.

Alegremente burlona, Maggie preguntó:

—¿En tu propio beneficio?

—¿Qué te parece todo lo que he hecho en beneficio de American City? Maggie sólo tardó un instante en contestar:

—No hablaba de ti en el aspecto de hombre público, sino sólo desde un punto de vista privado.

—Pues debes tener en cuenta que American City ha influido mucho en mi vida privada.

El señor Verver calló unos instantes y añadió:

—¿Y qué te parece todo lo que he hecho en beneficio de mi prestigio?

—¿Tu prestigio allá? Lo has entregado a aquella gente, a aquella gente horrible, recibiendo a cambio menos que nada. Se lo has entregado para que lo hagan trizas, para que se inventen esos horribles chistes vulgares sobre tu persona.

Casi ingenuamente, Adam Verver alegó:

—Bueno, los chistes horriblemente vulgares carecen de todo interés para mí.

Triunfal, Maggie exclamó:

—¡Exactamente! Todo lo que te afecta, todo lo que te rodea, va a tu costa, gracias a tu magnífica indiferencia, a tu increíble tolerancia.

Sin alterar la postura en que estaba sentado, el señor Verver miró en silencio durante un rato a su hija. Después se levantó despacio, se metió las manos en los bolsillos y se quedó de pie ante su hija. Sonriendo, dijo:

—Naturalmente, hija mía, tú vives a mi costa. Jamás he tenido la intención de que trabajes para ganarte la vida. No me gustaría ser testigo de ello.

Durante unos breves instantes guardaron silencio otra vez, frente a frente. El señor Verver observó:

—En consecuencia, digamos que he tenido para contigo los sentimientos propios de un padre. ¿Cómo es posible que tales sentimientos me transformen en una víctima?

—Es posible debido a que te sacrifico.

—¿A qué?

En este instante, Maggie comprendió que se le deparaba la mejor oportunidad que hasta el momento había tenido de hablar, y quedó durante un minuto como presa en la impresión que su padre le causaba ahora, con aquella tensa sonrisa que llegaba a lo más hondo de ella, a sus últimas profundidades, sondeando su secreta inquietud. Éste fue el momento en todo el proceso de su recíproca vigilancia en que menos faltó para que el delgado tabique que mediaba ente ellos fuera atravesado por el más leve toque erróneo. Bastaba el aliento de cualquiera de los dos para que aquella apariencia se estremeciera. Se trataba de un tejido perfecto pero tensamente clavado en un marco, y susceptible de ceder si cualquiera de los dos respiraba con un poco de fuerza. Maggie contuvo el aliento al conocer por los ojos de su padre, en cuyo fondo brillaba una luz que no podía apagar, que éste intentaba llegar a una seguridad, que quería saber si la certidumbre de su hija era la misma que la suya. La intensidad de la importancia que su padre daba a ello en aquellos momentos fue lo que la convenció de manera absoluta, de manera que, encaramada en una altura de vértigo ante él, y bajo la cegadora luz de su observación, Maggie se tambaleó casi violentamente durante unos instantes, y durante este tiempo toda su persona fue la mismísima imagen del equilibrio que cada cual a su manera se esforzaba en mantener. Y lo estaban manteniendo sí, o, por lo menos, Maggie lo mantenía; y comprendió, mientras su sensación de vértigo se desvanecía, qué era lo que debía hacer, lo que podía hacer con éxito. Se sintió dura, tenía que hacerlo, tenía que hacerlo de una vez para siempre, mediante su ficción, ahora, allí donde se encontraba. Tanto ocurrió en tan breve tiempo que Maggie ya sabía que conservaba la serenidad. La había conservado gracias a la advertencia que vio en los ojos de su padre. Maggie sabía que había recuperado la frialdad, sabía por qué la había recuperado y cómo la había recuperado, y esto fue precisamente lo que la ayudó. Su padre se había dicho: «Maggie no resistirá más y mencionará a Americo, dirá que me sacrifica a él, y lo que de esta declaración derive —juntamente con tantas otras cosas— confirmará mis sospechas». Su padre vigilaba los labios de Maggie, esperaba los síntomas que anuncian el sonido, y en tanto estos síntomas no se produjeran, nada sabría que ella no midiera debidamente al dárselo a saber. En estos instantes, Maggie había recuperado el dominio de sí misma hasta el punto de que parecía saber que le sería más fácil hacer que su padre mencionara a su esposa que a su padre hacer que ella mencionara a su marido. Vio que, si hacía lo preciso para obligar a su padre a evitar decir inconscientemente «Charlotte, Charlotte», éste se delataría. Tener esta seguridad bastaba a Maggie, quien vio con más y más claridad, a medida que discurrían los instantes, qué era lo que los dos estaban haciendo. Su padre estaba haciendo aquello hacia lo cual se había dirigido, aproximándose más y más a ello constantemente. Había averiguado cuál era el camino para llegar al punto en que era más posible que Maggie aceptara, ¿y dónde había asentado los pies ésta, durante las semanas anteriores y los días anteriores, sino en su aceptación de la oferta? Maggie se enfrió, se tornó más y más fría, mientras sufriendo, hacía lo preciso para que aquella inmediata visión de la actitud personal de su padre no la debilitara. Su mayor certidumbre era la intensidad de la presión que en ella ejercía su padre, y pensaba que, si no hubiera ocurrido algo horroroso, ninguno de los dos se vería obligado a hacer cosas horrorosas. Por otra parte, Maggie tenía la ventaja de poder mencionar a Charlotte sin delatarse, como enseguida demostró a su padre.

—Sencillamente, te sacrifico a todo y a todos. Considero que las consecuencias de tu matrimonio son perfectamente naturales.

El señor Verver echó un poco la cabeza hacia atrás, se ajustó las gafas y dijo:

—¿Ya qué llamas tú «consecuencias», querida?

—A tu vida, tal como tu matrimonio la ha conformado.

—¿Es que no ha hecho de mi vida exactamente aquello que deseábamos que fuera?

Maggie vaciló, luego sintió que se serenaba mucho más de lo que hubiera podido soñar:

—Exactamente lo que yo deseaba, es cierto.

La mirada del señor Verver, a través de los cristales de las gafas recién ajustadas, seguía fija en los ojos de Maggie, y con su sonrisa fija y más intensa, parecía darse cuenta de que su hija actuaba impulsada por una inspiración correcta. El señor Verver dijo:

—¿Y lo que yo deseaba nada importa?

—Para mí carece de significado, como carece de significado todo lo que has conseguido. Precisamente esto es lo importante. No me dedico a averiguar el significado, jamás lo he hecho. Saco de ti sólo lo que puedo, todo lo que me has proporcionado, y dejo que por tu parte hagas lo que puedas con el resto. Lo tuyo es el resto. ¡Ni siquiera me preocupo de…!

—¿De qué?

El señor Verver observaba a su hija, mientras ésta vacilaba levemente mirando a su alrededor para hurtarse a la constante visión del rostro de su padre.

—De lo que realmente te ocurre. Parece que desde un principio nos hubiéramos puesto de acuerdo en que no me preocupara de ello, y este acuerdo es, desde luego, maravilloso para mí. ¡No dirás que no lo he observado a rajatabla!

No, el señor Verver no lo dijo, a pesar de que Maggie le dio la oportunidad para ello, al callar para recuperar el aliento. El señor Verver sólo dijo:

—¡Oh, Dios mío, oh, oh…!

Pero esta exclamación de nada sirvió pese a que Maggie tenía que saber cómo era aquel fracaso —tan reciente pero ya tan distante— a que hacía referencia. Maggie repitió su negativa, evitando que su padre menoscabara la verdad de lo que ella pensaba:

—Jamás me pregunté nada y, como puedes ver, ahora tampoco lo hago. He seguido adorándote, pero ¿qué es esto en una hija con un padre como tú?, ¿qué es esto sino una cuestión de buena y cómoda organización, de tener dos caras, tres casas en vez de una, y habríamos tenido cincuenta si yo lo hubiera deseado, y en hacer lo preciso para que tú veas al niño? ¿No pretenderás, supongo, que lo natural hubiera sido, por mi parte, tan pronto tú te pusiste a vivir solo, enviarte a American City?

Fueron preguntas directas que sonaron nítidamente en el aire suave del bosque. Durante un rato Adam Verver reflexionó acerca de estas preguntas. Sin embargo, poco tardó Maggie en ver lo que la reflexión inducía a su padre a hacer con aquellas preguntas. El señor Verver dijo:

—Cuando hablas así, ¿sabes qué me induces a desear, Mag?

Y el señor Verver volvió a esperar. A Maggie le causaba la impresión de que algo que había estado detrás de todo lo hablado, profundamente oculto en la sombra, avanzaba cautelosamente hacia ella, tanteando el terreno antes de aparecer.

—Por lo general me haces desear regresar a American City. Cuando te portas así…

Pero el señor Verver se contuvo.

—¿Cuando me porto así…?

—Me haces desear el regreso. Me induces a pensar que American City sea el mejor lugar para nosotros.

Estas palabras hicieron vibrar a Maggie:

—¿«Nosotros»?

—Para Charlotte y para mí. ¿Sabes que sería una buena lección para ti el que nos fuéramos?

Dichas estas palabras, el señor Verver esbozó una sonrisa, ¡y qué sonrisa! Añadió:

—Y si sigues así, regresaremos.

En ese instante la copa de la convicción de Maggie se llenó hasta el borde, de modo que hubiera bastado el más leve toque para que rebosara. Ésta era la idea de su padre, y la claridad de tal idea, por un instante, casi la deslumbró. Fue como un haz de luz en cuyo centro veía a Charlotte como un objeto representado, por contraste, en negro; la vio vacilando en su campo visual, la vio alejada, transportada, condenada. Y su padre había mencionado a Charlotte, la había mencionado de nuevo, y Maggie le había obligado a ello, que era lo que más había necesitado. Era como si ella hubiera acercado al fuego una carta escrita con invisible tinta simpática, y las letras hubieran aparecido en tamaño todavía mayor del que ella esperaba. Tardó unos segundo en darse cuenta de ello: pero cuando habló, causó la impresión de haber doblado la hoja en que estaban aquellas líneas de indecible valor, y de habérsela guardado en el bolsillo:

—Bueno, en ese caso sería yo, al igual que siempre, la causa de tus actos. No tengo la menor duda de que eres capaz de hacer lo que acabas de decir si estimas que será en mi beneficio.

Riendo, remató sus palabras con las siguientes:

—Incluso en el caso de que este beneficio sólo sea el pequeño placer de haber «seguido yo así», como tú has dicho. En consecuencia, permite que mi goce, sea cual fuere el precio, siga consistiendo en expresarte eso que yo denomino «sacrificio» tuyo.

Maggie efectuó una profunda inhalación. Había conseguido que su padre hiciera todo lo que hubiera debido hacer ella, y había iluminado la senda a ello conducente sin mencionar a su marido. El silencio con que Maggie había hecho tal referencia fue tan claro como un sonido seco y preciso, inevitable; ahora el señor Verver avanzó por el camino que este silencio había marcado, y con repentino aire de confesar plenamente, por fin, la posición en que Maggie se encontraba, y de formular la pertinente pregunta que comportaba el implícito conocimiento de lo anterior, dijo:

—En este caso, ¿consideras que no sé defenderme?

—A esto exactamente me he estado refiriendo. Y si no fuera por…

Pero Maggie no acabó la frase, los dos quedaron de nuevo en silencio, frente a frente. Hasta que el señor Verver dijo:

—El día, querida, en que yo estime que comienzas a sacrificarme, te lo diré.

Un poco sorprendida, Maggie preguntó:

—¿Que «comience», dices?

—Sí. Y ese día será aquel en que dejes de creer en mí.

Con lo cual el señor Verver, fija aún la mirada a través de los vidrios de las gafas en su hija, las manos en los bolsillos, el sombrero un poco echado hacia atrás, las piernas algo separadas, causaba la impresión de haber quedado plantado allí para dar una sensación de seguridad con la que se le había antojado podía también obsequiar a Maggie, a falta de otras cosas, antes de cambiar el tema de la conversación. Para Maggie esto produjo el efecto propio de un recordatorio: recordatorio de todo lo que su padre era; de todo lo que había hecho, de todo lo que Maggie podía considerarle representante, además de ser un padre perfecto para ella, de todo lo que, con carácter eminente, en los dos hemisferios, había sido capaz de hacer, y, en consecuencia, de todo aquello hacia lo que deseaba, de ningún modo ilegítimamente, llamar la atención de Maggie. La persona de «éxito», la persona benemérita, el gran ciudadano bueno, generoso, original, sin miedo y sin tacha de voluntad, el consumado coleccionista, la gran autoridad infalible, todo esto había sido su padre y todo esto seguía siéndolo, y ella estimó, en aquel instante, que estas realidades daban a su padre, de una manera maravillosa, una personalidad que debía tener muy en cuenta al tratarle, tanto al apiadarse de él como al envidiarle. En estos momentos tenía la impresión de que su padre fuera de tamaño superior al natural; durante estos momentos lo vio bajo una luz reveladora que había brillado ante ella en muchas ocasiones del pasado, pero que jamás fue tan intensa y casi magistral como ahora. Ahora la serenidad de su padre formaba parte de todo: de su éxito, de su originalidad, de su modestia, de su exquisito trato social, de su inescrutable e incalculable energía. Y quizá fuera esta cualidad —principalmente por ser resultado, en esta ocasión de un admirable y perceptible esfuerzo— lo que le convertía a sus ojos en una obra de arte más preciosa que cuantas había tenido él ante los suyos. De forma absoluta, hubo un momento en que esta impresión de Maggie fue en aumento, incluso como la del típico observador en el silencioso museo, embelesado ante el objeto con fecha y nombre, orgullo del catálogo, pulido y consagrado por el trabajo del tiempo. Principalmente extraordinario era el número de diferentes maneras en que el señor Verver podía mostrar a Maggie que era así. Estaba dotado de fortaleza y esto constituía lo más importante. Era seguro, y la expresión de esto en él en ningún momento había quedado tan identificada con su demostrado buen criterio para cuanto fuera raro y verdadero. Pero sobre todas las cualidades destacaba la de su constante juventud, era maravillosamente joven, lo cual coronaba el efecto que producía en la imaginación de Maggie. Antes de que pudiera darse cuenta, Maggie quedó transportada, elevada por la impresión de hallarse sencillamente ante un hombrecillo grandioso, profundo y elevado, y que no cabía la posibilidad de efectuar la más leve distinción entre amarle con ternura y amarle con orgullo. De una forma extraña esto representó, bruscamente, un inmenso alivio. La convicción de que su padre no había fracasado y que jamás fracasaría purgó la condición de la mezquindad en que ambos se hallaban, la transformó de manera que parecía que hubieran surgido de su transmitida comunión, sonriendo casi sin dolor. Era como una nueva confianza, y al instante Maggie supo todavía mejor por qué. ¿Acaso no era debido a que ahora estaba pensando en ella como hija suya, a prueba durante estos mudos segundos, como fruto de su sangre? Yen este caso, si ella, con su consciente pasioncilla, no era hija de la debilidad, ¿qué era sino todo lo fuerte que debía ser? Maggie experimentó cómo este sentimiento la iba llenando y la

elevaba más y más. En este caso, tampoco ella había fracasado, sino todo lo contrario. La fortaleza de su padre era la fortaleza de Maggie; el orgullo de Maggie era el orgullo de su padre, y los dos juntos eran decentes y competentes. Todo lo anterior quedó contenido en la respuesta que Maggie dio a su padre:

—Creo en ti más que en cualquier otro ser.

—¿Más que en todos aquellos en quienes crees?

Maggie vaciló al pensar en lo que esto significaba, pero cien mil veces vio que no cabía la menor duda.

—Más que en todos, en absoluto.

Ahora nada había recatado, había hablado con la mirada en los ojos de su padre, en total entrega. Maggie añadió:

—Y pienso que tú crees en mí de la misma manera.

En silencio, el señor Verver la miró durante un minuto más, pero cuando habló lo hizo en el tono adecuado:

—Sí, aproximadamente.

—¿De acuerdo?

Maggie había hablado con el tono de dar fin a la conversación, con el tono de estar de acuerdo en otros asuntos, de estarlo en todo. Jamás volverían a hablar de aquel tema.

—¡De acuerdo!

El señor Verver sacó las manos de los bolsillos, y en el momento en que Maggie las cogió, la atrajo hacia su pecho, y contra él la retuvo. La retuvo firmemente y largo tiempo, y Maggie se relajó con abandono, pero fue un abrazo augusto y casi severo que, a pesar de su intimidad, no producía revulsión y no acabó con la inconsecuencia de las lágrimas.

Capítulo XXXVIII

Después de lo dicho, Maggie se dio cuenta de que tanto ella como su padre habían contado con la ayuda de la influencia de haber sido vista, por casualidad, pocas noches antes, abrazando a la esposa de su padre. El regreso de éste al salón coincidió por azar con dicha demostración de afecto, que tampoco se perdieron su marido y los Assingham, quienes, interrumpiendo la partida de bridge, habían abandonado la sala de billar juntamente con el primero. En aquella ocasión, Maggie tuvo clara conciencia de lo que la impresión causada en los otros podía, a la larga, coadyuvar en beneficio de su causa, más aún si tenemos en cuenta que, como sea que ninguno parecía tener deseos de ser el primero en comentar el hecho, éste había adquirido, con carácter perceptible, el especial matiz de la consagración conferida por la unanimidad del silencio. Maggie bien hubiera podido considerar que el efecto fue un tanto embarazoso, por la prontitud con que se separó de Charlotte, como si hubieran sido descubiertas en un trance absurdo, al darse cuenta de que tenían espectadores. Por otra parte, los espectadores —según parecía— no podían suponer, habida cuenta de las actuales relaciones, que las dos fueran propensas a recíprocas demostraciones de afecto; sin embargo, ante la duda entre la simpatía y la hilaridad, forzosamente tuvieron que estimar que la única manera de evitar que todo comentario hablado o reído resultara vulgar podía consistir en que fuera inteligente. Evidentemente contemplaron a las dos jóvenes esposas como si se tratara de un par de mujeres en el acto de hacer «las paces» efusivamente, tal como se supone hacen las mujeres, principalmente cuando se trata de reconocidas insensatas, después de haber andado a la greña; pero, al mismo tiempo, percatarse del acto de la reconciliación comportaba, por parte de su padre, por parte de Americo, por parte de Fanny Assingham, una aceptada visión de los motivos de la diferencia. El incidente significó algo, significó demasiado para cada uno de los testigos, a pesar de lo cual nadie hubiera podido decir algo sin causar la impresión de decir esencialmente esto: «¡Mirad, mirad a esas dulces criaturas! ¡Las disenciones han terminado!». «¿Las disensiones? ¿Qué disensiones?», hubieran contestado las dulces criaturas inevitablemente, con lo cual el ingenio de los otros hubiera quedado obligado a efectuar ejercicios de acrobacia. Nadie había llegado a la altura de ser capaz de inventar, de improviso, una razón ficticia de distanciamiento entre las dos esposas, es decir, de inventar una razón que ocupara el lugar de la verdadera, la cual se respiraba en el ambiente desde hacía largo tiempo, como habían percibido las más afinadas sensibilidades, por lo que todos, a fin de evitar situaciones comprometidas, fingieron, inmediatamente después, que no habían visto cosa que cualquier otro hubiera podido ver.

De todas maneras, el panorama mental de Maggie quedó inundado por la luz reflejada por el total de las suposiciones, suposiciones que permitieron virtualmente a todos los presentes, y Charlotte no fue excepción ni mucho menos, exhalar un largo suspiro. El mensaje de la escenita fue diferente para cada uno de los presentes; pero de manera muy destacada produjo el efecto de reforzar, e incluso reforzar inmensamente, el general esfuerzo llevado a cabo semana tras semana y, en los últimos tiempos, con marcado éxito, de hablar y actuar como si nada ocurriera. Sin embargo, con principalísimo interés la mente de Maggie, mientras tuvo ante sí aquella copa, se fijó en la naturaleza del éxito conseguido por Charlotte. Ante todo, si por un lado intuía el secreto sobresalto que su padre seguramente tuvo, la secreta curiosidad experimentada por su marido, y la manera en que Fanny, secretamente, había visto hacerse la luz ante sus ojos, por otro se daba cuenta del alto beneficio que lo ocurrido comportaba para Charlotte. Maggie sentía en todo su ser que

Charlotte lo sentía, y comprendía que la publicidad había sido absolutamente necesaria para coronar su humillación. Era el último toque, y ahora ya nada faltaba. Y dicho sea en honor de su madrastra, la señora Verver había causado la impresión de desear demostrar, desde aquella velada, que lo reconocía con suma vehemencia. Maggie revivió una y otra vez los minutos en cuestión, y se descubrió a sí misma reiteradas veces en el trance de hacerlo. Hasta tal punto fue así que la velada entera formó una unidad, como si se tratase de algo regulado por unos poderes ocultos que la dominaron, unos poderes ocultos que, por ejemplo, dieron a los otros cuatro la precisa inquietud para que todo ocurriera como debía ocurrir, haciendo lo preciso para que su partida de bridge —abstracción hecha de la abismal imagen que para Maggie representó — se interrumpiera en el momento adecuado, obedeciendo al impulso jamás confesado, de descubrir la verdad, emulando, aunque más tarde, la inquietud de Charlotte. Esta última preocupación suscitada de forma claramente perceptible por aquel miembro del grupo que vagaba por el exterior de extraña manera y que no estaba vagando ignorado, a pesar de la simulada ceguera de los demás.

Y si bien la señora Verver, entre tanto, causó a Maggie la impresión de emprender un rumbo claramente determinado, por la última y fausta ocurrencia en que aquella noche había fructificado, nuestra joven amiga no por ello dejaba de observar que, en verdad, la señora Verver no había recuperado la tranquilidad con carácter de permanencia absoluta. De modo indudable, había visto que Charlotte deseaba ponerse a la altura de las circunstancias y comportarse con magnificencia; había comprendido que Charlotte había decidido que la mejor manera de conseguirlo era demostrar que las seguridades por ella arrancadas allí, bajo el alto y frío esplendor del salón, con destellos de cristal y de plata, no sólo habían arrojado aceite sobre las turbulentas aguas de la diferencia que mediaba entre las dos, sino que el mecanismo de las relaciones entre una y otra había quedado sumido en un baño de dicho lubricante. Charlotte había excedido con mucho los límites de la discreción al insistir, en su capacidad de pagar en la debida proporción un servicio que estimaba generoso. Maggie bien hubiera podido preguntar: «¿Generoso?, ¿por qué?», ya que si Maggie hubiera sido veraz, tal servicio no habría sido de importancia. En este caso, tanto la una como la otra hubiesen tenido ocasión de comprobar vívidamente que los labios de la Princesa no tropezaban con dificultades a la hora de ser veraces. Aunque en realidad debemos decir que si el humor de ésta hubiera sido capaz de entregarse a las alegrías internas, difícilmente habría podido resistir la tentación de contemplar cómo un ser tan inteligente como Charlotte podía estar tan engañado. La teoría del comportamiento generoso formulada por Charlotte iba manifiestamente encaminada a expresar que la palabra de su hijastra, al hacer borrón y cuenta nueva, como suele decirse, había devuelto la serenidad a la relación entre las dos, en la que ni una sola nube se veía. En resumen, y contemplada desde este punto de vista, su teoría había sido idealmente concluyente, de tal manera que jamás podría volver a aparecer el fantasma de cualquiera de los asuntos de que habían tratado. Sin embargo, ¿acaso la esencia de lo ocurrido no era la propia de una transacción un tanto pasajera? Verdaderamente, al cabo de una semana Maggie tuvo ocasión de sospechar que su amiga comenzaba, un tanto abruptamente, a recordarlo. Maggie estaba convencida de cuál había sido el ejemplo que con su actitud su marido había dado a su amante, ejemplo con el cual la profesión de fe de Maggie hacia ésta había sido un acto de adecuación exquisitamente calculado, pero no por ello su imaginación dejaba de buscar en el oculto juego de la influencia de su marido la explicación de todo cambio que se produjera en la superficie, de toda diferencia en la expresión o en la intención. Tal como sabemos, a lo largo de su vida, la Princesa en pocos terrenos había permitido que su fantasía se desatara, pero dicha facultad se liberaba de todo freno cuando penetraba en el vacío de la relación entre el Príncipe y Charlotte. La fantasía de la Princesa podía atestar de imágenes aquel territorio, imágenes siempre constantemente renovadas, que allí bullían como las extrañas combinaciones que se ocultan en el bosque al atardecer, se acrecientan y adoptan formas definidas, y luego regresan a la vaguedad; para Maggie se distinguían por el hecho de ser siempre imágenes oscuramente agitadas. Ella se había despedido de aquella anterior visión del estado de dicha, visión poco segura por la intensidad de la dicha. Desorientada, había dejado de ver aquella pareja de wagnerianos enamorados de ópera (en lo más hondo de su espíritu, Maggie hacía comparaciones de este género) prietamente entrelazados en su bosque encantado, en un verde lugar tan romántico como un soñado viejo bosque germánico. Contrariamente, ahora el cuadro era velado, cubierto por la oscuridad de la inquietud, detrás de la cual Maggie percibía confusamente una procesión de formas que lamentablemente habían perdido su preciosa confianza.

A pesar de que Maggie, en la actualidad, tenía con Americo pocas relaciones personales sin trabas, ni siquiera su imitación de ellas, y que de día en día estas relaciones eran menos, tal como ella misma había previsto desde el principio, su activa concepción de la accesibilidad de Americo al privado y no extinguido

derecho de su amiga a proseguir sus actividades no era menos activa que antes. A pesar de todo, imaginaba a Americo todavía ocupado en oprimir resortes y dominar corrientes o, mejor dicho, poniendo sordina a todas las posibilidades, manteniéndolas más y más acalladas, y llevando constantemente a su cómplice a un nuevo recodo del camino. En cuanto a lo que hacía referencia a ella, Maggie adquiría clara conciencia, con el paso de las semanas, de los ingeniosos recursos que Americo empleaba para compensarla de la falta de franqueza, en lamentable medida, privación que quizá había dejado en los labios de Americo un poco de aquella misma sed que Maggie sentía que le secaba los suyos, del tormento del peregrino extraviado que aguza el oído en las arenas del desierto para percibir el posible, imposible, murmullo del manar del agua. Sin embargo, ella pensaba en esta inhibida conducta de Americo cuando mayores deseos sentía de encontrar una base que diera dignidad a aquella dura pasión que sentía y que nada entre cuanto él había hecho pudo apagar. No faltaban las horas, horas de soledad, en las que Maggie abandonaba la dignidad, pero también había otras horas en las que, pegada con su alada concentración a una profunda celdilla de su corazón, acumulaba en ella la ternura como si la hubiese libado todo ella en las flores. Americo caminaba ostensiblemente al lado de Maggie, pero en realidad vivía si interrupción en el mundo gris en el que se movía irremediablemente a tientas. Darse cuenta de ello era, por parte de Maggie, un continuo dolor de duración indefinida —quizá durante siempre—, que sólo podía desaparecer por un acto de Americo. Maggie nada más podía hacer a este fin, ya que había hecho cuanto había podido. Entre tanto, no era fácil tolerar la actitud que Charlotte había tomado, como persona que se guiaba por Americo, aceptando la guía de éste incluso en dosis de amargura; sin embargo, con él perdida se hallaba en traidoras profundidades. Con toda claridad se percibía que Americo había advertido a Charlotte, al comunicarle ésta la inapreciable seguridad que había recibido de su esposa, que debía tener buen cuidado de evitar que su satisfacción revelara, en parte, el peligro en que se hallaba. Maggie esperó inactiva durante un día, después dio tiempo a Americo de enterarse sin reserva de cómo había mentido por él; esperó la luz de un leve reflejo de tal conocimiento, que apenas sabía en qué podía consistir, en la actitud de Americo. Durante estas horas de espera, se preguntó qué evolución retardada podía haber precipitado la pobre Charlotte involuntariamente. Y así vemos que Charlotte volvía a ser para Maggie la pobre Charlotte, incluso mientras ésta vivía humillada; la razón que explicaba todo acudía reiteradamente a la mente de nuestra joven amiga, envuelta en el concepto de lo que había ocurrido en secreto. Maggie veía a Charlotte frente al Príncipe, en el acto de aceptar de éste las más frías y severas prevenciones, a las que iban anejas más profundas dificultades para los dos. Maggie la oía preguntar, irritada y sombría, en nombre de Dios —su valentía no agradaba al Príncipe—, qué tono tenía que adoptar, y oía a Americo contestar con voz en la que todas la sutiles notas conocidas y admirables sonaban vívidamente en los oídos de Maggie, que esas pequeñas prudencias deben ser por uno mismo arbitradas. La Princesa comprendía con claridad que, a este respecto, respiraba el frío aire que Charlotte respiraba, se alejaba del Príncipe en compañía de Charlotte; se alejaba con ella, animada de creciente compasión, de acá para allá rezagada tras Charlotte, mientras oía su propia voz preguntándose a sí misma dónde podría reposar. Maravillosa era la manera en que envuelta en estas imaginaciones Maggie trazaba círculos y se demoraba, como si estuviera materialmente invisible, siguiendo a Charlotte, contando todos los pasos que ésta malgastaba irremediablemente, reparando en todos los obstáculos que podían obligarla a detenerse.

En consecuencia, el paso de unos cuantos días como el anterior produjo un cambio en la percepción de la inmediata beatitud del triunfo, de un triunfo magnánimo y sereno, con que las consecuencias de la escena nocturna en la terraza habían condenado a nuestra joven amiga a pactar. Como sabemos, Maggie había tenido la visión de las doradas rejas retorcidas, de la puerta de la jaula violentamente abierta desde dentro, del ser aprisionado vagando en libertad, cuyos movimientos no dejaron de tener durante aquel breve momento impresionante belleza; pero su límite, aunque en otra dirección, se había hecho patente a la vista de la última conversación de Maggie con su padre bajo los grandes árboles. Entonces fue cuando Maggie vio el rostro de su madrastra amargamente situado en el lugar hacia el que, en el curso de la sesión, de tan significativa manera su padre había orientado el suyo; entonces fue cuando comprendió que podía llegar el momento en que lo viera palidecer; entonces fue cuando tuvo la impresión de saber el significado de sus propios pensamientos, bajo la sombra de la más temible referencia de su padre, cuando ella calificó a Charlotte de «condenada». Y si es cierto, como digo, que ahora la atención de Charlotte trazaba círculos lentamente, tampoco cabe negar que de vez en cuando se detenía durante ciertos trances en los que Maggie miraba, de forma absoluta, con los graves ojos de Charlotte. Y lo que con ellos siempre veía era la imagen de un menudo y silencioso caballero que llevaba, mientras se movía por el campo visual, un sombrero de

paja, un chaleco blanco, una corbata azul, un cigarro entre los dientes, y las manos en los bolsillos. Él, a menudo, presentaba la espalda encorvada, medía despacio la perspectiva del parque y contaba ensimismado (así parecía) sus pasos. Durante una o dos semanas, hubo horas intensas en las que realmente parecía que Maggie siguiera cautelosamente los pasos de su madrastra por la gran casa, de estancia, de ventana a ventana, sólo para verla, de aquí para allá en todas partes, en trance de poner a prueba su inquieta visión, de indagar su destino, de examinar su problema. Sin duda, Charlotte se encontraba ante algo con lo que nunca se había encontrado, algo que representaba una nueva complicación y que había engendrado una nueva ansiedad; algo que Charlotte llevaba consigo envuelto en la servilleta de la aceptada reprensión de su amante, buscando en vano un rincón en donde dejarlo sin riesgos. La disimulada solemnidad y la prolongada inutilidad de su búsqueda hubieran parecido grotescas a cualquier observador un poco más irónico, pero la capacidad de ironía de Maggie, que hemos estimado naturalmente escasa, jamás lo había sido tanto como ahora; había momentos en los que Maggie, invisible, veía con los ojos de Charlotte, momentos en los que el simple efecto de estar junto a ella, le ponían el corazón en la garganta, y poco faltaba para que le dijera: «Domínate cuanto puedas, procura no sentir demasiado terror, querida, y verás cómo todo se arregla».

Maggie se daba cuenta de que Charlotte podía contestar a estas palabras diciendo que era fácil decirlas, incluso que poco significado podían tener mientras el meditativo hombrecillo con el sombrero de paja siguiera haciendo acto de presencia, con su indescriptible aire de estar tejiendo una mágica telaraña, de tejerla él solo. En cualquier lugar del panorama en que se produjeran las apariciones del hombrecillo se le veía absorto en esta ocupación, y en dos o tres extraordinarias ocasiones, Maggie pudo darse cuenta de que este hombre le insinuaba que estaba al tanto de la impresión que producía. Hasta después de la larga conversación recientemente sostenida en el parque, no se percató de lo profunda y exhaustivamente que los dos se habían comunicado; en consecuencia, los dos iban a permanecer juntos, por el momento, de manera muy parecida a la que dos bebedores dados a la conversación apartan un poco las sillas de la mesa en la que hasta el momento han apoyado los codos, y en la que han vaciado sus rebosantes copas boca abajo, y a los compañeros de bebida nada más les queda por hacer o decir, salvo confirmar con sus plácidos silencios que el vino ha sido bueno. Se habían separado preparados por el vino, preparados para cualquier cosa, y todo lo que entre los dos pasó, a medida que el mes se consumía, confirmó la verdad de esta comparación. Nada había actualmente entre los dos salvo que se contemplaban el uno al otro con infinita confianza; no necesitaban más palabras, y cuando se reunían en los profundos días veraniegos, incluso cuando se reunían sin testigos, cuando se besaban al saludarse por la mañana, al despedirse por la noche o en cualquiera de las ocasiones de contacto que tan libremente siempre habían celebrado, ni siquiera un par de pájaros volando en lo alto hubieran causado menor impresión de albergar el deseo de proponer el uno al otro sentarse y volver a hablar preocupadamente. Hasta tal punto era así que, cuando se hallaban en la casa, en donde el número de tesoros del señor Verver, en espera de ser trasladados, era mayor que en cualquier tiempo pasado, Maggie se limitaba a mirar a su padre desde el otro extremo de la gran galería, orgullo de la mansión, como si se hallara en una sala de un museo y fuera una joven entusiasta armada con un Baedeker y su padre un vago caballero que incluso desconociera los Baedekers. Desde luego, el señor Verver siempre había tenido la costumbre de pasear pasando revista a sus posesiones e inspeccionando el estado en que se encontraban, pero ahora a Maggie le parecía que su padre se dedicaba casi con exageración a este pasatiempo; cuando Maggie pasaba junto a su padre y éste se volvía para dirigirle una sonrisa, ésta advertía, o imaginaba advertir, una mayor profundidad en el leve y perpetuo zumbido de la contemplación de su padre. Parecía que canturreara para sí, *sotto voce*, mientras paseaba; también en ciertas ocasiones se dio el inefable caso de que Charlotte, al lado de Maggie, vigilando, escuchando, siempre presente, se esforzó en quedar lo bastante cerca del señor Verver para poder discernir la canción oculta en aquel sonido, pero por razones derivadas del propio modo en que el sonido era emitido, se alejó como si no se atreviera a hacerlo.

Una de las atenciones con que Charlotte liberalmente obsequiaba a su marido, casi desde el instante de su matrimonio, fue la de interesarse en sus rarezas y valorar debidamente sus gustos, ya que la innata pasión de Charlotte por los objetos bellos y su agradecido deseo le inducían a no perder oportunidad alguna de que el señor Verver le diera lecciones al respecto. A su debido tiempo, Maggie tuvo ocasión de ver cómo Charlotte comenzaba a «utilizar» cuanto podía esta desdichada fuente natural de comprensión entre los dos. Ella tomó posesión íntegramente de aquel terreno y dio a entender con extraño exceso, bien cabía estimarlo así, la presunción de que aquel terreno era para ella y su marido, todo el terreno, el medio común dotado

del aire más puro, más claro y más respirable. Y llegó el momento en que Maggie se preguntó si Charlotte, con esas intensidades de aprobación, no encerraba excesivamente al señor Verver en su provincia; pero ésta era una queja que el señor Verver jamás había formulado a su hija. Por su parte, Charlotte debía considerar, por lo menos, que gracias a su admirable instinto y a su amplitud de percepción, parejos a los del señor Verver y en ningún momento rezagados con respecto a los de éste, nunca había cometido ante él una discordante equivocación o le había dicho una estupidez reveladora. Durante aquellos días veraniegos, Maggie tuvo que reconocer maravillada que, a fin de cuentas, ésta era una de las maneras de ser una esposa afable; nunca lo reconoció más paladinamente que en aquellos extraños momentos en que encontraba a los *sposi*, como Americo los llamaba, bajo los abovedados techos de Fawns, tan juntos y tan separados al mismo tiempo, mientras efectuaban su cotidiana inspección. Charlotte iba un poco rezagada, enfáticamente atenta, se detenía cuando su marido se detenía, pero lo hacía a una distancia de dos o tres vitrinas, o de otros tantos objetos sucesivos, y no hubiera sido erróneamente representada la imagen de su vinculación si se habría dicho que parecía que el señor Verver llevaba en una de sus embolsilladas manos el extremo de un largo cordón de seda cuyo otro extremo enlazaba el hermoso cuello de Charlotte. El señor Verver no tiraba del cordón, pero el cordón estaba allí; no arrastraba a Charlotte, pero ésta le seguía, y los indicios que, según he dicho, le parecían a la Princesa extraordinarios eran dos o tres insinuadas expresiones faciales que la presencia de su esposa no impedía que dirigiera a su hija. Esta presencia tampoco impedía que Maggie, al pasar, debemos añadir, con toda seguridad, se sonrojara un poco al percibir aquellas expresiones. Quizá quedaran reducidas a una sonrisa sin palabras, absolutamente sin palabras, pero esta sonrisa era el suave tirón dado al trenzado cordón de seda, y la interpretación que ella le daba, conservada en su seno hasta que se había alejado, sólo quedaba formulada como si hubiera el riesgo de que fuera subrepticiamente escuchada cuando tenía una puerta cerrada a su espalda. «¿Lo ves? Ahora la llevo atada por el cuello, así la llevo a su condena; ella ignora cuál es su condena, tiene el miedo en el corazón. Si tuvieras las oportunidades que yo tengo, en calidad de marido, de aplicar el oído allí, lo oirías latir sordamente. Charlotte piensa que su condena sea un horrible lugar al otro lado del océano, lugar horrible para ella, pero no osa preguntarlo, ¿comprendes? Así como preguntarlo le da miedo, de la misma manera que tiene miedo de tantas cosas que ahora ve multiplicarse a su alrededor como portentos y traiciones. Sin embargo, cuando lo sepa lo sabrá.»

Entretanto, la oportunidad de Charlotte, la única oportunidad para mantener aquel aire de confianza que tan bien había revestido anteriormente y que tanto armonizaba con la firmeza y el encanto de su persona, fue la presencia de los visitantes que, a medida que avanzaba la temporada, nunca quedaba totalmente interrumpida, sino al contrario. Gracias a las personas que acudían invitadas a almorzar o a tomar el té y a ver la casa, ahora atestada, ahora famosa, Maggie llegó a considerar que este numeroso elemento de «compañía» era como una especie de renovado suministro de agua al tanque en el que nadaban como un grupo de jadeantes carpas. Sin duda esa presencia y el trato de unos y otros era una ayuda para ellos que debilitaba el peso de los muchos silencios que hubieran formado su relación íntima. Hermoso e incluso maravilloso era para Maggie el efecto de estas intervenciones, sobre todo lo era el efecto de hacer comprender a cada uno de ellos el heroísmo que cabe concurra en lo superficial. Porque aprendieron a vivir en lo superficial, permanecían en lo superficial cuantas horas podían y, por fin, lo superficial adquirió la forma de espaciosa estancia central en una casa encantada, con gran rotonda abovedada y acristalada en la que cabía la posibilidad de que la alegría imperase, pero cuyas puertas daban a siniestros pasillos tortuosos. Allí iban los unos en busca de los otros, con rostros inexpresivos que desmentían la existencia de todo género de inquietud ante el encuentro, pero cerraban cuidadosamente las puertas a sus espaldas; las cerraban todas salvo la que comunicaba el lugar, a lo largo de un recto pasillo cubierto, con el mundo exterior. Con ello provocaban la irrupción de la sociedad, imitando la entrada por la que los disfrazados artistas de circo penetran en la pista. Maggie se dio cuenta de que la intensa vida social que la señora Verver había llevado acudía ahora en su ayuda afortunadamente, al tener «amigos personales». Los amigos personales de Charlotte habían estado en Londres, en las dos casas; esto constituía uno de los más útiles placeres, y ahora, en la actual crisis, atenuaba la imagen de aislamiento que Charlotte presentaba. Fácilmente se adivinaba que los mejores momentos de Charlotte eran aquellos en que no tenía miedo a comportarse como una persona aburrida, con el fin de refrenar la curiosidad de sus amigos. Esta curiosidad quizá fuera vaga, pero la inteligente dueña de la casa era concreta y clara: les hacía ir de un lado para otro, sin ahorrarles nada, como si contara todos los días con una nueva cosecha de cosas que hacer. Maggie volvió a coincidir con Charlotte en la galería, a las horas más extrañas, y la vio allí sacando la

aleccionadora consecuencia de esto, insistiendo en el interés de aquello, burlándose de determinada pretensión, sonriendo para dejarlos a todos desorientados —características inevitables en casi todas las ocasiones últimamente—, de manera que nuestra joven amiga, incurablemente propensa a las sorpresas, se maravillaba del misterio por el que un ser que, en ciertos aspectos, era capaz de estar tan apasionadamente acertado, podía en otros estar tan lamentablemente equivocado. Cuando el padre de Maggie paseaba por la galería con aire distraído, en compañía de su esposa, era ésta siempre la que iba en retaguardia; pero el señor Verver se rezagaba cuando Charlotte hacía de cicerone. Quizá en estos casos, yendo de un lado para otro, benévola y modestamente, por los aledaños de la exposición, era cuando menos podía resistir su aire de quien parece tener una mágica telaraña. Brillantes mujeres se dirigían a él vagamente emocionadas, pero el trato del señor Verver le comprometía poco más que si fuera el empleado encargado de comprobar, cuando la oleada invasora se había ido, que las vitrinas seguían cerradas y de recomponer el orden y la simetría.

Una mañana, una hora antes del almuerzo, y cuando ya había llegado un contingente de vecinos —vecinos con diez millas de por medio—, de quienes la señora Verver se había encargado, Maggie se detuvo en el umbral de la galería por la que se disponía a pasar. Se paró vacilante, por la impresión que le causó la cara de su padre, que aparecía por la puerta frontera. Charlotte se encontraba en la parte central de la galería, a mitad de sus explicaciones, manteniendo la atención del apretado grupo de visitantes mediante la austera gracia de su autoridad, en tanto los visitantes, casi atemorizados (¡ahora que se encontraban allí!), por haber anunciado por telegrama que ansiaba ver y admirar, se hallaban limitados a esta congruencia. La voz de Charlotte, alta, clara y un poco seca, llegaba a los oídos de su marido y de su hijastra, mientras dejaba fuera de toda duda su alegre sumisión a los imperativos del deber. Sus palabras, dirigidas a su amplio auditorio, resonaron durante varios minutos en el lugar, mientras todos la escuchaban con un silencio que parecía se hallaran en una iglesia resplandeciente a la luz de los cirios, y que Charlotte cantara un himno de alabanzas. Fanny Assingham parecía transida de devoción. Fanny, cuya fidelidad a esta amiga había menguado tan poco como su fidelidad a su anfitrión, a la Princesa, al Príncipe o al Principino, siempre coadyuvaba con Charlotte mediante lentas evoluciones y murmullos que daban testimonio de su presencia. Maggie reemprendió el avance y, después de la primera vacilación, no pudo dejar de advertir la actitud solemne e inexcrutable que Fanny adoptaba a fin de evitar que la provocaran a delatar lo que sentía. Sin embargo, Fanny se delató revelando un pensamiento en el momento en que Maggie estuvo cerca de ella; bajó la vista hasta el nivel de la Princesa el tiempo suficiente para causar la impresión de aventurarse a dirigirle una muda argumentación: «Supongo que se da usted cuenta de que si Charlotte no hiciera lo que ahora está haciendo no habría modo de saber qué podría estar haciendo». Ésta fue la luminosa verdad que Fanny Assingham arrojó a su joven amiga. Ésta, irresistiblemente conmovida, volvió a experimentar sus dudas y, a continuación, para no revelarlo excesivamente a las claras o, mejor dicho, para ocultarlo y también para ocultar algo más, dio media vuelta, se acercó a una ventana y se quedó allí, esperando inhibida sin causa aparente que lo justificara.

—La pieza más grande de las tres tiene la rara peculiaridad de que las guirnaldas que la rodean, como pueden ver, son del más depurado *vieux Saxe* y no tienen el mismo origen que la pieza ni son del mismo período, incluso cabe decir que, a pesar de ser maravillosas, no son de tan acabada perfección. Se incorporaron en un período posterior mediante un procedimiento del que quedan muy pocos ejemplos y ninguno de ellos tan importante como el presente; en realidad, éste es un ejemplar único, por lo que, aunque la pieza íntegra es un poco *baroque*, su valor es, a mi parecer, inestimable.

De esta manera vibraba la voz de alto tono, animada por la intención de causar una impresión que estaba fuera del alcance de la sensibilidad de los boquiabiertos vecinos; de esta manera la oradora, diciéndolo todo, sin ponerse pesada en nada, como hubieran reconocido jueces menos interesados, parecía justificar la fe en ella honrosamente depositada. Entretanto, a Maggie le había ocurrido una cosa rarísima estando junto a la ventana: de repente se echó a llorar, o estuvo a punto de hacerlo, pues el iluminado rectángulo se nubló ante su vista. La voz seguía sonando, sus vibraciones, iban solamente dirigidas a oídos atentos; pero verdaderamente hubo treinta segundos durante los cuales la voz sonó, para nuestra joven amiga, como el grito de un alma en pena. Si seguía sonando un minuto más, la voz se quebraría y moriría; por esta razón Maggie tuvo la impresión de que, en brusco movimiento, se volvía hacia su padre: «¿No podemos pararla? ¿Es que no lo ha hecho ya bastante?». Una pregunta como ésta fue la que pensó que su padre supuso en los labios de Maggie. Entonces separados por la mitad de la longitud de la galería, ya que el señor Verver no se había movido del lugar en que ésta le sorprendió, él causó la impresión a su hija de

confesar, con lágrimas en los ojos, que experimentaba una emoción idéntica a la suya. Claramente llegaron a los oídos de Maggie estas palabras: «Pobrecilla, pobrecilla, hay que ver lo que es capaz de hacer en beneficio de mi prestigio…». Después de esto, mientras padre e hija se hallaban de esta manera unidos, tuvieron otro instante de tensión. La vergüenza, la lástima, el profundo conocimiento, la protesta ahogada, e incluso la adivinada angustia, dominaron al señor Verver que sonrojándose intensamente dio media vuelta y se fue bruscamente. Este ocasional momento de comunión, que fue sólo cuestión de segundos en que sonaron voces ahogadas, tuvo la virtud de causar a Maggie la impresión de elevarse en el aire, hasta tal punto las profundas intuiciones que sentía le dieron que pensar. Honradamente, todo era muy confuso; la consideración posterior que Maggie hacía de situaciones como ésta no dejaba de revelar —ya hemos visto que así era— que la última sensación, como un castigo, quizá consistiera en que alguna de las tristezas y congojas que sentía eran un tanto ridículas. Por ejemplo, aquella mañana Americo había estado tan ausente como de un tiempo a esta parte parecía desear se advirtiera que lo estaba. Se había ido a Londres para pasar allí el día y la noche, era una necesidad que ahora experimentaba a menudo, y que se había resignado a obedecer durante la estancia de invitados y la presencia de bellas mujeres, por las que Americo sentía vivo interés, según teoría públicamente cultivada. A la esposa de Americo jamás se le había ocurrido calificarle de ingenuo, pero por fin llegó el momento de hacerlo. Al alba de un día de agosto, en que Maggie no podía dormir, mientras inquieta y lentamente paseaba de un lado a otro y se detenía ante la ventana para respirar el fresco aire del bosque, descubrió que la leve brisa del Este le llegaba juntamente con otra realidad casi igualmente prodigiosa. A la rosada luz del alba vio que Americo, a pesar de todo, era capaz en ocasiones de pecar por excesivo candor. Si no fuera así, no hubiera dicho que la razón de ir a la casa de Portland Place, en pleno agosto, consistía en ordenar libros. En verdad que últimamente Americo había estado comprando muchos libros, y que le habían mandado desde Roma verdaderas maravillas del arte de la impresión, en el que su padre siempre estuvo interesado. Pero cuando la imaginación de Maggie siguió a Americo hasta la polvorienta ciudad, hasta la casa de persianas cerradas y de interiores empalidecidos por las fundas, donde sólo vivían un criado y una ayudante de cocina, no le vio dedicado, en mangas de camisa, a abrir maltratadas cajas de embalaje.

En realidad, menos propensa a ser fácilmente engañada, Maggie le vio vagar por las oscuras estancias cerradas, ir de un lado para otro de la casa, profundamente hundido en los sofás, durante largos ratos, fija la vista al frente, a través del humo de encadenados cigarrillos. Estimó que ahora a Americo lo que más le gustaba en el mundo era quedarse a solas con sus pensamientos. Y como Maggie seguía creyendo que estaba más relacionada con los pensamientos de Americo que en cualquier instante del pasado, bien podía decirse que era lo mismo que si estuviera a solas con ella. Maggie imaginaba a Americo descansando de la constante tensión de la superficialidad a que estaba sometido en Fawns, y se sentía vulnerable a las impresiones derivadas de la ineludible alternativa antes mencionada. Parecía que hiciera penitencia de una manera sórdida; estar encerrado en una cárcel o ser privado de dinero, y muy poco hubiera costado a Maggie imaginárselo privado de comida. Americo hubiera podido irse, hubiera podido dedicarse a viajar. Tenía derecho, pensaba ahora la maravillosa Maggie, a muchas más libertades de las que se tomaba. El secreto de Americo consistía, desde luego, en que en Fawns no hacía más que retraerse, allí estaba siempre ante la presencia de gentes que le inducían a retroceder como empujado por una fuerte presión, para refugiarse en cuantos misterios del orgullo, en cuantos recursos interiores de hombre de mundo, había podido conservar. Por razones ignoradas, en aquella aurora, mientras contemplaba la salida del sol, Maggie había medido de manera extraordinaria las realidades que Americo tenía a su disposición para sacar de ellas pretextos justificativos de su ausencia. En aquel momento, Maggie concluyó que Americo había huido de un sonido. Este sonido todavía resonaba en los oídos de Maggie, era el de las altas y coaccionadas vibraciones de la voz de Charlotte ante las vitrinas en la silenciosa galería, la voz que había herido, atravesándola, a la propia Maggie el día anterior, como si fuera la voz de un ser atenazado por la angustia; la voz que, mientras Maggie buscaba refugio en la borrosa ventana, hizo asomar las lágrimas a sus ojos. Su comprensión llegó a tal altura que la indujo a maravillarse de que Americo no sintiera la necesidad de más ausencia o de más gruesos muros. Maggie también meditó acerca de esta admiración; en sus consideraciones presentes no veía menos en las omisiones de Americo que en aquello que hacía, animado por intenciones de una belleza tal que la conmovían tanto por ser oscuras. Era como estar suspendida sobre un jardín en la oscuridad. No veía nada de las cosas confusas en trance de crecimiento, pero se daba cuenta de que había flores aún cerradas, y su vaga dulzura transformaba el aire en su medio natural. Americo se había alejado, no en un acto de cobardía, y esperaría en el lugar de los hechos las consecuencia que en este

mismo lugar había realizado. Maggie cayó de rodillas, quedando con un brazo apoyado en el asiento de la silla que tenía junto a la ventana; en esta posición quedó cegada por el resplandor de la percepción de que el propósito de él sólo podía ser el de esperar a su lado, fuera lo que fuese lo que llegara. De esta manera, durante largo rato sintió que el punto al que Americo se acercaba era su cara oculta, y al cabo de un rato, cuando los extraños gemidos escuchados en la galería volvieron a sonar inevitablemente en los oídos de Maggie, ésta vio la pálida y dura mueca que aquel sonido provocaba en Americo.

Capítulo XXXIX

La semejanza no se le ocurrió a Maggie en los primeros instantes en que estuvo en el exterior, en el caliente y silencioso esplendor de la tarde de un domingo, sólo el segundo domingo de veraneo, en que el grupo de los seis —el grupo de los siete, pues incluía también al Principino— había quedado prácticamente liberado de agregaciones e invasiones. Al ver a Charlotte sentada a lo lejos, precisamente en el sitio en que esperaba verla, la Princesa se preguntó si su amiga no había quedado afectada de una forma muy semejante a aquélla en que ella se sintió afectada aquella noche, en la terraza, por la aguda persecución de la señora Verver. Hoy la relación había quedado invertida. Charlotte veía cómo Maggie se le acercaba, atravesando lagunas de luz solar que aún conservaba la naturaleza del mediodía, de la misma forma que ella había visto a Charlotte amenazarla a través de la oscuridad sin estrellas y hubo un momento, aquel en que Maggie esperó un poquito, mientras las dos se encontraban en la distancia, en que el intervalo quedó animado por un reconocimiento no menos silencioso y, según todas la apariencias, no menos preñado de extraños significados que aquel otro que se produjo en la ocasión anterior. Sin embargo, lo importante era que las dos jóvenes habían intercambiado sus respectivas posiciones. Desde la ventana de su aposento Maggie había visto a Charlotte salir de la casa, a una hora extraña, las tres de la tarde de un canicular día de agosto, para pasear por el jardín o la arboleda, y se sintió determinada a actuar con la misma viveza que había causado el impulso de su amiga tres semanas antes. Era el día más caluroso de la estación, y para personas que se hallaban todas ellas ociosas, parecía que una siesta fuera de rigor, pero nuestra joven amiga todavía no había comprendido tan plenamente que en aquel refinamiento de reposo de los miembros del grupo se daba algo parecido a la silla vacía en el festín. Y esto quedaba todavía más de relieve si tenemos en cuenta que en el festín, en sentido literal, en el gran comedor en penumbra, acababa de tener lugar la fresca y ceremoniosa celebración del almuerzo, sin la presencia de la señora Verver, representada por la alegación de un fuerte dolor de cabeza, que no fue comunicado al grupo de comensales por su marido, sino directamente al señor Verver, en el momento en que se reunían, por la doncella de la señora Verver, al efecto delegada y solemne ejecutora de la encomienda.

Maggie se había sentado junto a los otros para hacer los honores a los manjares hábilmente refrescados, a la lenta circulación de preciosas y sonoras jarras y a la reserva de referencias en muchas direcciones —la pobre Fanny Assingham apenas osaba asomar la nariz de la acolchada concavidad a la que se había retirado —. Un consenso de languidez, que hubiera podido ser considerado como un temor común, dominó la escena, atenuado solamente por los esporádicos experimentos del padre Mitchell, hombre santo, bueno y voraz, londinense amigo y consejero de toda confianza, agobiado por el trabajo, que había decidido encargarse, por una o dos semanas, del ligero servicio religioso de aquellos contornos y de los ritos que en la localidad florecieron gracias a la generosidad de Maggie, y que gozaba a discreción de todas las riquezas de la mansión. El padre Mitchell hablaba, sí, hablaba sin que traba alguna se lo impidiera, conversando principalmente con la vaga y voladera sonrisa de los restantes comensales, y la capacidad que la Princesa tenía de considerar que, en estas ocasiones, el padre Mitchell era una bendición no quedaba menoscabada por lo bien que podemos considerar la embarazosa conciencia que la Princesa tenía de haber hallado su camino, desde el primer momento de sus preocupaciones, sin la guía del padre Mitchell. La Princesa se preguntaba a veces si éste sospechaba la manera más que sutil, perversa en que había prescindido de él, y

alternaba las visiones de todo lo que el padre Mitchell había adivinado con las certidumbres de que nada había adivinado. Sin embargo, se daba el caso de que ahora él se entregaba cortésmente a llenar lagunas de silencio, debido precisamente a que su intuición, más sutil que la expresión de su rostro, le bastaba, le hacía comprender cuán quebradiza, dicho sea en sentido figurado, era la situación y la prolongada tensión a su alrededor casi siempre ausente en los círculos en que el lujo se emparejaba con la virtud. Algún día, cuando llegaran tiempos más felices, Maggie confesaría al padre Mitchell lo que no había confesado, imponiendo con ello una gran carga a su conciencia, pero al presente Maggie llevaba en su débil y agarrotada mano un vaso lleno hasta los bordes, habiendo prometido de antemano que no permitiría que rebosara siquiera una gota. Maggie temía el aliento de una inteligencia superior, la vibración de una luz más clara, la mismísima ayuda celestial, y, además, sin que supiera por qué, aquella tarde respiraba como nunca en un ambiente de penosa opresión.

Algo grave había ocurrido en algún lugar y bien sabía Dios que Maggie tenía a su disposición una amplia gama de suposiciones. Tenía la impresión de que el corazón se le paraba cuando se preguntaba si se había producido una disensión entre su marido y su padre. Aterrada, cerraba los ojos ante la posibilidad de semejante hecho y ante su vista pasaba la procesión de feas formas que dicha disensión podía revestir. «Descubre el resto por ti mismo» había dicho Maggie a Americo, a modo de última palabra acerca de quien más «sabía», la noche en que se rompió la copa. Y Maggie estaba orgullosa de no haberle ayudado ni siquiera un ápice en este empeño, rectamente congruente consigo misma desde aquel día. Éste era el trabajo que Maggie había dado a Americo durante todas estas semanas; le había arrojado al seno de una ignorancia que ni siquiera podía intentar alcanzar la indiferencia, pero que tampoco llegaría a penetrar en el claro aire del convencimiento. Esta ignorancia había mellado el espíritu de Americo en la misma medida que su generosidad, y más de una vez se había dicho a sí misma que Americo, para romper el hechizo de que ella le había hecho víctima y al que el brillante marfil antiguo de la inatacable superficie de su padre había dado carácter tan absoluto, cometería algún error o algún acto de violencia, rompería el vidrio de una ventana para poder respirar, e incluso quizá transgrediera alguna de sus benditas e inveteradas normas de buen gusto.

Éstas eran las sombras que ascendían y descendían ante ella mientras el padre Mitchell parloteaba, juntamente con otras sombras como las que cubrían a la propia Charlotte, las que la marcaban como presa de iguales sospechas, por la idea de un cambio, con el que ésta no osaba enfrentarse en las relaciones entre los dos hombres. Y también había otras posibilidades, al parecer de Maggie. Había demasiadas posibilidades de tristes realidades; cuando los nervios le han hecho a uno todo lo que los nervios pueden hacer, y le han dejado en tinieblas pobladas de peligros que merodean, se halla uno como el guarda nocturno, en un paraje frecuentado por fieras cuando ha acabado los medios para mantener encendida la hoguera. En aquel estado de nervios Maggie podía suponer casi cualquier cosa de cualquier persona; casi cualquier cosa del pobre Bob Assingham, condenado a eternas obediencias y a dar solemnes muestras de aprecio de los vinos de su padre; casi cualquier cosa del buen sacerdote en el momento en que se reclinó en su asiento, con las gordezuelas manos enlazadas sobre el estómago, haciendo girar los pulgares el uno alrededor del otro. El buen sacerdote miraba con fijeza las jarras, los diferentes platos de postres; los miraba medio de soslayo, como si en el día de hoy hubiera podido conversar con estos objetos mejor que con cualquiera de las personas presentes. Pero también esto dio lugar a que la Princesa ejerciera su imaginación y, antes de que pudiera darse cuenta de ello, se encontró en medio de una imaginaria conversación entre el padre Mitchell y Charlotte, nacida de un intento del padre Mitchell de tratar con ella, de su evidente alejamiento, recientemente advertido en Charlotte de las prácticas de todo género de devoción. De ello el padre Mitchell hubiera sacado su ingenua conclusión, lo hubiera considerado síntoma de reprimidos problemas interiores y, naturalmente, hubiera sacado la moraleja de que la manera de salir de esos malos pasos no consistía en prescindir del gran remedio. Probablemente él había incrementado en la joven aquel deseo de falso reposo a que tan engañadamente se había entregado. Semejante falsedad había puesto en el camino de nuestra joven amiga otras trampas comparadas con las cuales la imputación de traición, incluso en el caso de ser aceptada, hubiera parecido un camino de rosas. De forma extraña, la aceptación hubiera dejado a Charlotte sin nada que hacer, y hubiera podido permanecer, caso de quererlo así, en total pasividad insolente, en tanto que el no proceder contra ella, si es que así se le puede llamar, la dejaba con la necesidad de tenerlo que hacer todo y mucho más, si tenemos en cuenta el pretendido ambiente de confianza imperante. Charlotte tenía que confirmar, día tras día, la honradez de su causa y la justicia y la felicidad de su exención; por lo que, ¿no era lógico que en toda explícita preocupación mostrada por el padre Mitchell

hubiera un profundo desprecio hacia el éxito alcanzado por Charlotte?

De todos modos, la pregunta fue provisionalmente contestada cuando el grupo de comensales comenzó a dispersarse, con la versión que Maggie dio a la ausencia de la señora Verver, considerando que el pretexto con que intentó justificarla encubría en realidad una huida de la posibilidad de ser objeto de menosprecio. Maggie miró a los ojos al buen sacerdote antes de separarse, y los sacerdotes son, en el peor de los casos, y valga la expresión, personas maravillosas. Maggie tuvo la impresión, por un instante, de que el padre Mitchell estaba a punto de decirle con abismal suavidad: «Acuda al lado de la señora Verver, hija mía, y verá que puede ayudarla». Sin embargo, esto no ocurrió, nada ocurrió salvo el renovado giro de los pulgares sobre el estómago satisfecho, y la presencia del rostro sonrojado, el cómico candor que daba testimonio de la mano que en Fawns se dedicaba a elaborar la mayonesa para el salmón. Nada ocurrió salvo el alejamiento de los demás comensales, principalmente de los hombros levemente encorvados del padre de Maggie, que parecían tejer la mágica telaraña, por la fuerza de la costumbre, con no menos paciencia que cuando su esposa estaba presente. Verdaderamente, el marido de Charlotte percibía todo lo que podía percibirse, con sólo su presencia, lo cual quizá fuera exactamente la razón por la que este personaje se dispuso diligentemente a emular el claro ejemplo de «holgazanería» que veía a su alrededor. El señor Verver tenía sus ocupaciones: quizá la de ordenar libros en Fawns; además, la idea de echarse una siesta, habida cuenta de las circunstancias, no requería ser invocada a grandes voces. En esta ocasión, Maggie quedó a solas durante un minuto con la señora Assingham. Después de esperar un poco para poder hablar sin riesgos, pareció estar animada por la intención de manifestar algo. Hacía ya tiempo que para Maggie y para Fanny la etapa de «hablar largo y tendido» había terminado; ahora, cuando hablaban, lo hacían de hechos consumados. Fanny, por su parte, quería dar testimonio de la existencia de una atención a la que nada escapaba. Ella podía compararse con la amable señora que se demora en el circo mientras los espectadores salen vulgarmente por los vomitorios, y se encuentra al lado de la joven y fatigada trapecista —acrobático apoyo, cabe suponer, de unos padres exigentes y con problemas—, y da a la trapecista, en su calidad de oscura y meritoria artista, el testimonio de su benévolo interés. Sin embargo, lo que nuestra joven amiga veía con más claridad en su imaginación era que siempre la dejaban allí, en la brecha. Su función radicaba esencialmente en llevar la carga; en última instancia, de salvar omisiones y evasiones y, evidentemente, a ese trabajo había sido hoy abandonada con el único alivio de contar con la presencia de la señora Assingham, que vino a insinuar que también ella se encontraba en las almenas, aunque poco después se vio que su valentía estaba en gran parte integrada por pura curiosidad. La señora Assingham miró a su alrededor, vio que los demás miembros del grupo ya se habían alejado lo suficiente como para no oírla, y dijo:

—¿Realmente no desea que nos vayamos?

Maggie consiguió esbozar una débil sonrisa:

—¿Realmente desean irse?

Estas palabras motivaron que la señora Assingham se sonrojara y dijera:

—Bueno, la verdad…, no. Pero nos iríamos, lo sabe usted muy bien, sólo con que usted nos lo indicara con una mirada. Haríamos las maletas y nos iríamos… sacrificándonos.

—No haga sacrificios. Ayúdeme.

—Exactamente. Esto es lo único que quiero. Sería una bajeza. Fanny Assingham hizo una pausa, y añadió:

—¡Además, es usted espléndida!

—¿Espléndida?

La señora Assingham repuso:

—Espléndida. Además, ya le falta muy poco para salir del atolladero. Lo ha conseguido.

Pero Maggie sólo a medias comprendió sus palabras, y preguntó:

—¿Qué es lo que he conseguido?

—Lo que quería. Se van.

Mirando fijamente a la señora Assingham, Maggie preguntó:

—¿Era esto lo que quería?

—Bueno, usted no era quién para decidirlo. En realidad era asunto de él.

Después de dudar unos instantes, Maggie preguntó:

—¿De mi padre?

—De su padre. Ha elegido, y ahora ya lo sabe. Ella lo ve todo ahí, ante sí misma, y no puede hablar, ni

ofrecer resistencia, ni mover siquiera un dedo. Así se encuentra *Ella* —dijo Fanny Assingham.

Mientras las dos estaban allí, de pie, estas palabras evocaron un cuadro en la imaginación de la Princesa: el cuadro que las palabras de los demás evocaban siempre en ella, incluso cuando su propia visión ya percibía más imágenes de las que sus palabras podían expresar. A su alrededor vio, como si mirasen por las rendijas de los postigos, el duro resplandor de la naturaleza; vio a Charlotte allí, virtualmente acosada, y a pesar de ello, viendo cómo le era denegada la gracia de una última palabra protectora; vio a Charlotte allí, sin ayuda, pálida en su silencio, frente a su destino.

Maggie preguntó:

—¿Se lo ha dicho ella?

Su amiga sonrió con expresión de superioridad:

—¡No tengo necesidad de que me lo diga! A Dios gracias, todos los días veo algo nuevo.

A continuación, como si Maggie se preguntara qué era lo que la señora Assingham veía, ésta añadió:

—Veo las largas millas del océano y el temible y gran país, estado tras estado, país que jamás me ha parecido ser tan grande y tan terrible como ahora. Por fin los veo a ellos, día tras día y paso tras paso, en el último extremo; veo que nunca regresarán aquí. Nunca, pura y simplemente nunca. Veo el extraordinario e «interesante» lugar en el que yo nunca he estado, usted sí, y veo exactamente hasta qué punto se verá obligada a mostrarse interesada.

A estas palabras, Maggie replicó:

—Verdaderamente lo estará.

—Obligada.

—Interesada.

Después de esto se miraron a los ojos la una a la otra, durante un rato y, por fin, Fanny dijo:

—Lo estará, sí, tendrá que estarlo. Y así será para siempre, siempre, siempre.

Fanny Assingham había hablado como si estuviera plenamente de acuerdo con el parecer de su amiga; a pesar de esto, Maggie seguía mirándola fijamente. Las palabras habían sido solemnes y las visiones también, máxime si tenemos en cuenta que ahora se ampliaban más y más. Sin embargo, entre estas palabras y estas visiones, Fanny Assingham poco tardó en proseguir:

—Cuando hablo de «saber» no quiero decir que sepa tal como usted tiene derecho a saber. Usted sabe porque ve. Y yo no le veo a él.

Casi con ordinariez, Fanny Assingham aclaró:

—Ni le distingo.

Después de dudar una vez más, Maggie preguntó:

—¿Quiere decir que no ve, que no distingue, a Americo?

Pero Fanny se limitó a sacudir la cabeza, que era como una llamada a la inteligencia de su interlocutora, como si el hecho de distinguir a Americo fuera una cuestión superada desde hacía ya mucho tiempo. A continuación Maggie midió el alcance de la alusión de Fanny, y advirtió que lo que ésta añadió infundía mayor significado a sus anteriores palabras. A partir de ahora no se mencionaría nombre alguno; la señora Assingham borró prontamente este mensaje de sus ojos con una discreción que, a pesar de todo, no llegó a ser perfecta. La señora Assingham dijo:

—Usted sabe lo que él siente.

Al hablar, Maggie negó con la cabeza:

—Nada sé.

—Usted sabe cómo siente, cómo siente usted.

Pero Maggie volvió a negar.

—Nada sé. ¡Si supiera…!

Vacilante, Fanny preguntó:

—Si supiera, ¿qué haría?

Maggie estaba ya fatigada de aquello, dijo:

—Me moriría.

Y después de decir estas palabras, dio media vuelta y se fue.

A través de la casa en silencio, Maggie se dirigió a su aposento. Estuvo en él unos instantes, y sin saber por qué dejó el abanico para coger otro; luego se dirigió a las habitaciones en penumbra, donde, a esta hora, el Principino dormía la siesta. Cruzó la primera estancia desierta, el cuarto de juegos del niño, y se detuvo ante una puerta abierta. La estancia interior, ancha, en penumbra y fresca, se hallaba en calma. En

el centro del cuarto presidía la escena la amplia, antigua, histórica y real camita de su hijo, consagrada, al parecer, al protegido descanso del príncipe heredero, regalo que le fue ofrecido, al principio de su carrera por su abuelo. En su silencio, casi podía percibir la suave respiración del niño. El primer protector de los sueños del Principino se había instalado a su lado. Allí estaba sentado el padre de Maggie, con la cabeza hacia atrás, apoyada en el respaldo; con lo ojos cerrados; con el bien formado pie, tan propenso a delatar su nerviosismo, descansando en paz sobre la rodilla de la otra pierna; con el corazón insondable bajo el constantemente impecable frescor del chaleco blanco que siempre daba acogida en sus sisas a los firmes y prensiles pulgares. La señora Noble había desaparecido mayestáticamente. El cuarto daba en su totalidad un testimonio de su temporal abdicación; sin embargo, imperaba el estado de normalidad, y Maggie se quedó quieta sólo para mirar. Miraba por encima del borde superior del abanico que oprimía contra la cara, y miró durante el tiempo suficiente para llegar a preguntarse si su padre estaba realmente dormido, o si, dándose cuenta de su presencia, se limitaba conscientemente a estarse inmóvil. ¿Estarían los ojos de su padre sólo entornados y su mirada fija en ella? ¿Debía interpretar semejante actitud —el hurtarse a todo género de preguntas— sólo como otro signo de que todo quedaba relegado a ella, todo quedaba sobre sus propios hombros? De todas maneras, Maggie observó durante unos minutos la inmovilidad de su padre; después, como si con ello renovara una vez más su total sumisión, regresó silenciosamente a sus habitaciones.

Maggie sentía vivamente en su interior la fuerza de un extraño impulso que no era, en lo que a ella concernía, el deseo de liberarse de aquel peso. Era tan incapaz de dormir como lo había sido aquella madrugada, pocos días antes, en que contempló la primera luz del alba desde la ventana. Orientado a oriente, ese lado de su aposento se hallaba ahora a la sombra, con los postigos entornados; Maggie gozaba del placer que siempre le proporcionaba hallarse en aquella situación encaramada, dominando el panorama sobre las altas terrazas, parecida a aquélla que gozaría desde la torre de un castillo alzado sobre una peña. Cuando se encontraba allí, se cernía sobre los jardines y sobre los bosques, todo lo cual dormitaba a sus pies a aquella hora, en la inmensidad de la luz. Las millas cubiertas por la sombra parecían cálidas, los macizos de flores estaban oscurecidos, los pavos reales en las balaustradas llevaban lacias las colas, y las aves de menor tamaño espiaban entre el follaje. Todo parecía inmovilizado en aquel vacío hasta el momento en que se dispuso a dar media vuelta sobre sí misma. Maggie vio un punto móvil, una sombrilla de un verde pálido descendiendo la escalinata. Bajó a nivel inferior al de la terraza, alejándose, perdiéndose de vista a lo lejos. La sombrilla, por su natural posición, ocultaba la cabeza y la espalda de quien se protegía con ella, pero Maggie reconoció al instante el vestido blanco y la peculiar manera de caminar de aquella aventurera, comprendiendo, en consecuencia, que era Charlotte. Nada menos que Charlotte, que había elegido la cegadora luz de la primera hora de la tarde para explorar los jardines, y únicamente podía dirigirse a un lugar poco frecuentado en sus profundidades, o quizá más allá de ellas, que hubiera ya calificado de refugio sumo. La Princesa pudo contemplar a Charlotte durante unos minutos, la contempló durante el tiempo suficiente para darse cuenta, por la mera delación de su aire al andar y déla dirección emprendida, de que había iniciado cierta clase de huida. A continuación, la Princesa comprendió, por reflexión, la razón por la que el hecho de estar sentadas, quietas, se había convertido en algo imposible para cualquiera de las dos. Luego, de una forma confusa, a su mente acudió el eco de un viejo mito: la visión de lo atormentada por los tábanos o de Ariadna vagando sola junto al mar. Esto proporcionó a la Princesa la plena conciencia de sus intenciones y sus deseos. También hubiera podido ser en aquellos momentos una lejana heroína torturada, que debía interpretar un papel del que no tenía exacto precedente que la inspirase. Sólo sabía que, en todo momento, en todo instante, mientras estuvo sentada con los demás y sin ella, había sentido el deseo de ir al encuentro de aquel miembro separado del grupo. Sólo necesitaba un pretexto. Al cabo de un instante, lo había encontrado.

Antes de que la señora Verver desapareciera, Maggie reparó en que llevaba un libro. Distinguió, casi perdido entre los blancos pliegues del vestido de Charlotte, la oscura cubierta de un volumen que explicaría sus propósitos, en el caso de hallarse ante una sorpresa, y cuyo compañero se encontraba ahora precisamente sobre la mesa del cuarto de Maggie. El libro en cuestión era una vieja novela que hacía un par de días la Princesa había dicho que había traído consigo desde Portland Place, en la encantadora edición original en tres volúmenes. Charlotte había dado la bienvenida, con especial interés, a la oportunidad de leer dicha obra.

Nuestra joven amiga, a la mañana siguiente, encomendó a su doncella que llevara la novela a las habitaciones de la señora Verver. Poco después la Princesa observó que su mensajera, dando muestras de

escasa inteligencia o de distracción, sólo había llevado uno de los volúmenes, que no era precisamente el primero. Hallándose, en consecuencia, todavía en posesión del primero, Maggie vio que Charlotte, en fantástica decisión, se disponía a semejante hora a cultivar la lectura novelesca, inútilmente armada con el segundo volumen, por lo que decidió acudir inmediatamente en su ayuda. A este efecto, lo único que necesitaba era el volumen adecuado y una sombrilla, además, desde luego, de la valentía precisa para llevar a la práctica su principal propósito. Volvió a cruzar la casa sin hallar obstáculos en su camino, y salió a la terraza. La recorrió amparada en la sombrilla, animada, por aquella sensación de que se hubieran cambiado las tornas con respecto a su amiga, a lo que ya hemos hecho mención. Pero por mucho que la Princesa avanzara, después de haber descendido al campo abierto y de haber comenzado a explorar el terreno, veía que había avanzado aún más la señora Verver, a lo cual hay que añadir la rareza de haber cambiado la protección de su aposento por los espacios libres y de cegadora luz. Afortunadamente, sin embargo, no se daba el caso de que, persistiendo en la búsqueda, no se llegara a regiones de admirable sombra, ya que aquél era, según cabía presumir, el refugio que la pobre mujer huida había tenido presente en su mente, formado por varios anchos senderos, muy largos, densamente cubiertos en lo más alto por las plantas de rosas trepadoras y por las madreselvas que convergían en verdes perspectivas separadas, en una especie de umbrío templo, en una vieja rotonda, con columnas y estatuas, con hornacinas y techumbre, aunque su antigüedad sin correcciones, como todo lo que había en Fawns, no daba testimonio de violencias ejercidas en el presente, ni de amenazas en el futuro. En su frenesí, o como se le quiera llamar, Charlotte se había detenido allí. El lugar podía considerarse un retiro. Charlotte tenía la vista perdida en el espacio y estaba sentada en el lugar en que, sin prestar atención, se había aposentado, en el momento en que Maggie se detuvo.

Aquello era, ahora más que en cualquier momento anterior, una repetición de la escena nocturna en la terraza. La distancia que mediaba era más que suficiente para que Maggie tuviera la seguridad de que no había sido vista de pronto, y decidió esperar, animada por su particular intención, como Charlotte había esperado en la anterior ocasión, aunque mediando la diferencia, y qué diferencia, de la intención de la una y de la otra. Maggie tenía plena conciencia de ello, una conciencia tan plena que la puso impaciente, por lo que avanzó un poco, situándose al alcance de la vista que había estado mirando en otra dirección, pero que Maggie había invitado bruscamente al reconocimiento. Evidentemente, Charlotte ni siquiera había soñado con la posibilidad de que la siguieran, por lo que instintivamente, mientras dirigía su pálida mirada, se envaró dispuesta a protestar. Maggie se dio cuenta de ello, y también de la segunda impresión que su acercamiento había producido en su amiga. Se acercó más, grave y silenciosamente, aunque volvió a detenerse para dar tiempo a Charlotte a que hiciera lo que quisiera. Lo que quisiera, lo que pudiera, era lo que Maggie deseaba; sobre todo deseaba dar facilidades a su amiga en la medida que las circunstancias se lo permitieran. Esto no era lo que Charlotte había deseado aquella noche, pero ello carecía de importancia, pues lo que realmente importaba consistía en permitir que Charlotte tuviera conciencia de poder elegir lo mejor. Al principio, evidentemente, Charlotte se sobresaltó. Rápidamente se percató de que no había sido seguida sin un determinado propósito en la mente de quien la había seguido. ¿Y en qué podía pensar Charlotte, además, sino en la manera en que cuando ella fue la persecutora, indujo a su hijastra a comprender la intención y el espíritu de que llegaba animada? En aquella ocasión Maggie lo comprendió así; comprendió aquella dura insistencia, y la señora Verver se dio cuenta de ello, lo vio, lo oyó, y este maravilloso recuerdo de una presión eficazmente aplicada había quedado grabado en su mente. Pero la mirada de Charlotte era como un temor proyectado de que el tesoro enterrado, y tan deshonestamente hallado, del que la quieta expresión del rostro de su amiga, en aquel momento y después, había aceptado ser el profundo suelo, bien había podido salir, por sí mismo, a la superficie, y bien podía ser arrojado a sus manos. Durante uno de estos instantes, la Princesa tuvo la clara visión de la alarma de su amiga: «Es su mentira, es su mentira lo que ha quedado en mortal desacuerdo con ella. Charlotte ya no puede seguir sofocando su rebelión, y ha llegado a retractarse, y desmentirse, a denunciarse, para decirme la verdad clara y rotunda». Durante un interminable espacio de tiempo fue lo que Maggie se dijo, sin poderlo evitar, con voz sin aliento, aunque sólo produjo el efecto de hacerle comprender la indignidad y la miseria de su condición. Lo único que podía hacer era seguir allí, a la expectativa, poner a la vista de Charlotte el libro que llevaba, presentar el aspecto menos peligroso posible, parecer cuán abyectamente benévola pudiera, acordarse de aquellas personas de quienes había leído, en las novelas del salvaje Oeste, que levantaban las manos en el aire en ciertas ocasiones para demostrar que no llevaban revólveres. Por fin, Maggie incluso hubiera podido sonreír, a pesar de lo consciente que estaba de sus preocupaciones, para demostrar cuán

inofensiva era. Maggie mostró el volumen que llevaba en la mano, arma harto débil ciertamente; mientras seguía manteniendo las distancias, explicó con voz temblorosa tan dominada como le fue posible.

—Te he visto salir, te he visto desde la ventana y no he podido soportar la idea de que te encontraras aquí sin el principio de la novela. Éste es el principio. Te has equivocado de volumen, y yo te traigo el bueno.

Después de haber hablado, Maggie quedó inmóvil. Parecía que hubiera parlamentado con un posible adversario. Su leve y exaltada sonrisa causaba la impresión de pedir permiso formalmente. «¿Puedo acercarme más, ahora?», parecía decir Maggie con la expresión de su rostro. En el mismo instante vio desprenderse en Charlotte la respuesta en un extraño proceso, en un hecho integrado por varias contrastadas etapas, que Maggie percibió una a una. Al cabo de unos instantes, el temor había desaparecido del rostro de Charlotte, aunque de modo harto perceptible Charlotte todavía no podía creer que la hubieran inducido, de tan delicada y extraña manera, a sentir miedo. Si la habían inducido a sentir miedo había sido, por lo menos, con una finalidad: la que en el primer momento le había parecido peligrosa, necesariamente peligrosa. Que no lo era constituía el esplendente mensaje que Maggie insistentemente le transmitía con fuerza que no cabía resistir, gracias a esta percepción, gracias al inmenso alivio que comportaba, al término de tres minutos todo había cambiado de manera extraordinaria. En realidad, ella había ido a su encuentro porque la sabía condenada, condenada a una separación que era como un cuchillo clavado en su corazón, y en la visión de su irremediable y ciega búsqueda física de una paz que no podía alcanzar, algo de la imagen que la señora Assingham había dado de Charlotte, presta a ser arrojada a un triste futuro, al otro lado del océano y en el gran continente, parecía haberse convertido en realidad. De esta manera, Charlotte se había alejado, casi quemando sus naves de disimulo, para permitir que los horrores que ante ella tenía ejercieran su influencia sin testigos, e incluso después de que la intencionada presencia de Maggie hubiera adquirido inocentes apariencias, no cabe duda alguna de que ésta había llegado erizada de síntomas de extremosidad. Y no cabía decir de ellos que estuvieran cubiertos por cualquiera de las usuales gracias de la Princesa, sino que estaban al descubierto y se mostraban sin vergüenza. Para la Princesa eran trágicos, a pesar del disimulo que, con el retorno de una relativa confianza, prontamente comenzó a operar. Pero el cambio reveló vívidamente cuán trágico era el instantáneo funcionamiento del resorte del orgullo, en vistas a una posible defensa, cuando no a una posible agresión. En verdad, en el mismo instante el orgullo se convirtió en el manto utilizado para la protección y la perfidia, y Charlotte se envolvió en él para negar todo género de pérdida de su libertad. Estar condenada, en el caso de Charlotte, significaba haberse ganado con creces la condena, por lo que confesar que era desdichada equivalía a confesar haber incurrido en falsedades. No confesaría, mil veces no. Buscaría a su alrededor algo que diera color al hecho de haber roto sus ataduras, y lo haría franca y altivamente. Sus ojos se dilataron, su pecho jadeó mientras lo buscaba, y el efecto que esto produjo en Maggie fue el de inducirla a desear muy sinceramente poder ayudarla. Ahora, ésta se puso en pie, de manera que pareció decir: «¡Quédate aquí, si quieres!». Cuando Charlotte hubo dado unos pasos de acá para allá; cuando hubo mirado a lo lejos; cuando hubo fijado la vista en cualquier cosa menos en su visitante; cuando hubo hablado de la temperatura, declarando que le parecía maravillosa; cuando hubo dado gracias por el libro que, con cierta incongruencia, habida cuenta de que sólo tenía el segundo volumen, dijo le parecía menos inteligente de lo que había esperado; cuando hubo permitido que Maggie se acercara lo bastante como para poder dejar, sin tocarlo, el tributo en cuestión sobre el banco, cogiendo amablemente su superfluo compañero; cuando hubo hecho todo lo dicho, Charlotte se sentó en otro sitio, hallándose más o menos perceptiblemente en el dominio de su papel. Yen toda esta aventura, no hubo para nuestra joven amiga momento más extraño ahora, no sólo porque vio que su amiga se mostraba notablemente propicia a tomarla por aquella pobre e insignificante persona que tan fácil le resultaba fingir que era, sino que entró en un secreto trance en el que se preguntaba si no estaba inspirada por cierta suprema abyección. Vaga, aunque más y más luminosa, brillaba esta posibilidad ante Maggie. Por fin, por otra parte, Charlotte vio con claridad que, una vez más, se había colocado en una posición que permitía la pisotearan, como suele decirse, lo cual había dado mayor amplitud al escenario. De modo que, al poco tiempo, el escenario había adquirido la deslumbrante cualidad de ser más amplio para las dos.

La señora Verver dijo:

—Me alegra verte a solas porque hace ya algún tiempo que quería decirte una cosa. ¡Estoy cansada! ¡Cansada!

A fin de que Charlotte prosiguiera, Maggie preguntó:

—¿Cansada?

Charlotte no podía decirlo todo de un tirón. Pero Maggie ya había intuido de qué se trataba, y la luz de la comprensión iluminaba su rostro. Charlotte dijo:

—Cansada de esta vida, de la clase de vida que hemos estado llevando. Te gusta, ya lo sé, pero mi ideal es otro.

Ahora Charlotte irguió la cabeza, sus ojos luminosos miraban más triunfalmente, estaba encontrando su camino, lo estaba siguiendo. Maggie, segura de sí misma, sentada, contemplaba aquel espectáculo. Maggie se estaba reservando algo, algo cuyo valor solamente ella podía ponderar. Durante largos instantes, teniendo en consideración el sacrificio que la Princesa había decidido hacer allí, tuvo la impresión de ver desde tierra firme cómo Charlotte se arrojaba a aguas turbulentas, posiblemente traidoras.

Charlotte prosiguió:

—Veo otras posibilidades. Tengo una idea que me atrae en gran manera. Hace mucho tiempo que la tengo. Me he dado cuenta de que estamos equivocados. Nuestra verdadera vida no se encuentra aquí.

En un susurro, Maggie preguntó:

—¿Nuestra vida?

—La de mi marido y la mía. No hablo de ti.

Intentando no comportase como una estúpida, ni parecerlo siquiera, Maggie exclamó:

—Oh…

—Hablo de nosotros. Hablo de él —dijo Charlotte.

—Comprendo. Hablas de mi padre.

—De tu padre. ¿De quién, pues?

Se miraron duramente, la una a la otra, pero el rostro de Maggie se refugió en la intensidad de su interés. No era tan estúpida como para considerar que la pregunta de su amiga requería contestación, discreción que su bien dominado silencio produjo el efecto de recompensar al cabo de un instante.

Charlotte dijo:

—Debo arriesgarme a que me consideres egoísta; desde luego, sabes lo que comporta lo que he dicho. Pero lo reconozco, soy egoísta. Pongo a mi marido ante todas las cosas.

Sonriendo, sonriendo, Maggie dijo:

—Bueno, lo mismo hago con el mío.

—¿Quieres decir con esto que no tenéis diferencias? Pues tanto mejor.

Y después de decir estas palabras, prosiguió, volando todavía más alto:

—Sí, tanto mejor porque mis planes están ya totalmente formados. Maggie esperó. Su esplendor había adquirido más profundidad. Tenía la oportunidad al alcance de la mano. El único peligro consistía en echar a perder la oportunidad. Maggie tenía la impresión de caminar al borde de un abismo. Ahora dijo:

—¿Y puedo saber cuáles son esos planes?

Charlotte esperó sólo diez segundos, pero su respuesta fue seca y clara:

—Llevar a mi marido a su país, a su verdadera posición. Sin esperar más.

—¿Quieres decir, ahora, este verano?

—Quiero decir inmediatamente. Creo que puedo decírtelo, esto es algo que me interesa, que lo hago en mi propio beneficio. Quiero tener a mi marido para mí.

Dando a las palabras todo su peso. Charlotte añadió:

—Aunque te parezca extraño, quiero conservar al hombre con quien me casé. Y, a este fin, debo actuar.

Maggie, esforzándose todavía en seguir la senda que se había marcado, sintió que se ruborizaba hasta la raíz del cabello. Pensativa, preguntó:

—¿Inmediatamente?

—Nos iremos tan pronto como podamos. A fin de cuentas, el traslado de los objetos y muebles es sólo una cuestión de detalle. Esto siempre puede hacerse con dinero. Y tal como él lo gasta, es fácil. Lo que quiero es partir, de forma definitiva. Y quiero hacerlo ahora.

Después de decir estas palabras, la cabeza y la voz de Charlotte se levantaron a la par, y añadió:

—¡Y sé cuál será mi dificultad!

Muy por debajo del nivel de la atención consciente, en profundidades que ni siquiera ella podía saber, nació la inspiración de Maggie, que en el mismo instante, temblorosa, se transformó en palabras:

—¿Quieres decir que tu dificultad soy yo?

—Tú y él, al mismo tiempo, los dos juntos; siempre he tenido que verle a él acompañado de ti. Pero, si quieres saberlo, te diré que es una dificultad a la que hago frente, a la que ya he tenido que dar la cara, y

que me propongo superar. Luchar con esta dificultad nada agradable no ha sido para mí un placer, como bien puedes imaginar. Para decírtelo todo, te diré que esta dificultad me ha parecido, en ocasiones, demasiado fea, demasiado grande y demasiado extraña. Sin embargo, creo que se puede superar.

Al decir estas palabras, la señora Verver se puso en pie, y se apartó unos pasos, a fin de darles así más énfasis, mientras Maggie la miraba quieta, sentada. Ésta dijo:

—¿Quieres apartar a mi padre de mi lado?

El tono de agudo, eficaz, casi primitivo gemido que hubo en estas palabras obligó a Charlotte a volverse hacia Maggie, y este movimiento reveló a la Princesa la eficacia de su engaño. Algo latía en su interior como había latido aquella noche en que, en el salón, negó que sufriera. Ahora, la Princesa estaba dispuesta a mentir de nuevo si su amiga le daba la ocasión propicia para ello. Entonces la Princesa habría hecho todo lo que había deseado hacer. Charlotte le dirigió una escrutadora mirada, como si quisiera comparar la nota de resentimiento en la voz de Maggie con la expresión de su rostro y, percatándose de ello, ésta ofreció a la mirada de Charlotte todos los síntomas de lo que bien podía pasar por una sensación de derrota. La señora Verver dijo:

—Quiero estar realmente en posesión de mi marido. También estoy convencida de que es hombre que lo merece.

Maggie se levantó como si fuera a recibir a Charlotte en sus brazos y, maravillosa, exclamó:

—¡Y tanto que lo merece!

Maggie percibió inmediatamente que el tono en que había hablado producía el efecto deseado, ya que Charlotte, altanera y llameante, que incluso parecía haber llegado a creer en su apasionada comedia, preguntó:

—¿Crees que realmente sabes lo que se merece?

—Naturalmente, querida, creo que lo he sabido siempre y que sigo sabiéndolo.

Maggie dio la réplica inmediatamente y también dio en el blanco. Charlotte se limitó a mirarla en silencio durante unos instantes; luego pronunció las palabras que Maggie sabía iba a pronunciar, ya que ella misma había oprimido el resorte preciso:

—¡Ahora veo cuánto odias el matrimonio de tu padre conmigo!

Después de dejar pasar un instante, Maggie dijo:

—¿Acaso me lo preguntas?

Charlotte echo un vistazo a su alrededor, cogió la sombrilla que había dejado en el banco, tomó mecánicamente uno de los dos volúmenes de la olvidada novela, y después, más conscientemente, lo volvió a dejar en el lugar del que lo había cogido. Evidentemente, a Charlotte se le había ocurrido su última palabra. Produciendo un seco sonido metálico abrió la sombrilla, se la puso al hombro y, teniéndola así, la hizo girar, llevada por su orgullo. Bruscamente, Charlotte dijo:

—¿Si te lo pregunto? ¿Crees que hace falta? ¡He tenido ocasiones sobradas para ver lo mucho que has intrigado contra mí! La princesa exclamó:

—¡Oh, oh, oh!

Charlotte, alejándose de Maggie, llegó a uno de los arcos que limitaban la rotonda; en este punto, dio media vuelta y, llameantes los ojos, preguntó:

—¿No has intrigado contra mí?

Maggie se hizo cargo de estas palabras y las guardó durante unos instantes; las retuvo, cerrados los ojos, como si fuera un pájaro capturado que se debatía, y que ella tenía cogido con las dos manos, oprimido contra su pecho. Luego abrió los ojos y habló:

—¿Y qué importa esto, si he fracasado?

Desde el punto de salida de la rotonda, Charlotte preguntó:

—¿Reconoces que has fracasado?

Maggie esperó. Dirigió la vista, como su amiga había hecho momentos antes, a los dos volúmenes sobre el banco. Los juntó, los volvió a dejar en el mismo lugar, y tomó una decisión. Antes de que Charlotte, después de haberle dado tiempo, emprendiera el camino de regreso, Maggie dijo:

—¡He fracasado!

Maggie contempló cómo Charlotte, erecta y espléndida, se alejaba como si flotase por la perspectiva que formaba el sendero. Luego se sentó. Sí, había hecho todo lo que se había propuesto hacer.

Sexta parte

Capítulo XL

En uno de los últimos días del mes dijo a su marido:

—Haré lo que tú quieras si el hecho de que estemos aquí, de esta manera y en este tiempo, te parece absurdo, incómodo o imposible. Podemos despedirnos ahora, sin esperar más, o podemos volver tres días antes de que se vayan. Iré al extranjero contigo sólo con que tú lo digas: a Suiza, al Tirol, a los Alpes italianos, a cualquiera de los lugares en que estuviste anteriormente que tanto te gustaron; al que tú prefieras volver a ver, a cualquiera de esos sitios en que tan bien te encontraste al dejar Roma y de los que tan a menudo me has hablado.

El lugar en que se encontraban, en las circunstancias que motivaron esta propuesta, y el lugar en que hubiera verdaderamente parecido ridículo que se quedaran satisfechos, teniendo ya cerca el sórdido mes de septiembre londinense, era precisamente el lugar en que el desierto de Portland Place tenía un aspecto más desolado que nunca, y en que un adormilado cochero, escudriñando el horizonte para vislumbrar un posible cliente, podía olvidarse de los riesgos que la inmovilidad comporta. Pero Americo sostenía la extraña opinión, día tras día, de que su situación difícilmente se podía mejorar, e incluso no se mostraba remiso a replicar que, si la dura prueba que los dos estaban pasando le parecía a Maggie superar la capacidad de paciencia de los dos, toda decisión que tomaran lo harían para alivio de ella. Y se debía, en parte, a que Americo estaba firme y maravillosamente dispuesto a negarse a reconocer, hasta el fin, ni siquiera con una palabra dubitativa, que existiera o hubiera existido en su vida un solo elemento de los que convierten una situación en dura prueba; y que trampa circunstancial alguna, ni olvido en las «formas», ni accidente de irritación le habían conducido a semejante inconsecuencia. Su esposa hubiera podido insinuar que era consecuente con las admirables apariencias que desde un principio había revestido y había seguido revistiendo, de una manera excesivamente rígida, a costa de ella; sin embargo, resultaba que Maggie no era persona capaz de hacer semejante cosa, ni por asomo; el extraño y tácito pacto vigente en la actualidad entre los dos quizá estuviera basado en una inteligente comparación, en un claro ensamblaje de la clase de paciencia propia de cada uno de los dos. Maggie ayudaba a Americo, y éste se mostraba siempre dispuesto a hacer lo que se debía hacer, siempre y cuando Maggie le ayudara a ello. Este acuerdo, tácitamente renovado semana tras semana, había recibido la consagración del paso del tiempo, pero no hace falta decir que Maggie le ayudaba conforme a las condiciones pactadas por éste, y no las pactadas por ella o, dicho en otras palabras, que Maggie debía seguir los caminos no explicados, no señalados, elegidos por Americo. Si esta manera de actuar, resultante de una de las afortunadas características íntimas de Americo que aún no le habían abandonado completamente, daba el feliz resultado de hacer de él un hombre más propenso a aburrirse que a aburrir (con las ventajas de poder ceder libremente, aunque sin quedar convencido de que debía estar en deuda con el prójimo por haber cedido), ¿qué revelaba esta falsa faceta de la situación sino que Maggie vivía entregada a Americo? Si ella hubiera puesto en tela de juicio, o hubiera resistido, o hubiera interferido —o si se hubiera reservado semejantes derechos—, no habría estado entregada a Americo; a pesar de lo cual todavía se daban, y evidentemente seguirían dándose durante un tiempo, largos y tensos períodos en los que la situación de la pareja, al parecer de todos los observadores, se hallaba pendiente de la posible, imposible, defección de Maggie. Ella estaba obligada a resistir a ultranza, no podía ausentarse de su puesto ni siquiera durante tres minutos, ya que sólo de esta manera podía demostrar que

estaba al lado de su marido y no en contra de él.

Extraordinario era que Maggie hubiera invitado a su marido a dar tan pocos síntomas de estar, de haber verdaderamente estado en todo momento «al lado» de su esposa. Maggie no dejaba de hacerse esta reflexión ahora, en el estado de suspensión en que se hallaban, en el estado de suprema espera, reflexión que inducía a Maggie a reconocer que había estado obligada a «hacerlo todo», a seguir el camino íntegramente hasta el final, a avanzar infatigablemente, mientras él se quedaba quieto, como una estatua de uno de su antepasados. En sus horas de soledad Maggie consideraba que el significado de lo anterior radicaba en que Americo tenía un lugar, y que esto era un atributo indestructible, imborrable, que imponía en todos los demás —desde el instante en que querían algo concreto de Americo— la necesidad de dar más pasos que los que Americo podía dar, de dar vueltas alrededor de Americo y de recordar, en beneficio de éste, la famosa relación que se daba entre Mahoma y la montaña. A poco que se meditara sobre ello se vería que se daba el extraño caso de que el lugar de Americo era una realidad constituida para él por innumerables hechos: hechos básicamente de esa naturaleza que recibe el nombre de histórica; hechos realizados por antepasados, resultantes de ejemplos, de tradiciones, de costumbres, en tanto que el lugar de Maggie resultaba ser sencillamente aquel improvisado «puesto» —uno de esos puestos que se califican de avanzados— con el que se encontró vinculada a la manera que se encuentra vinculado un colonizador o un mercader a un nuevo país; incluso como una esposa india, con un hijo colgado a la espalda, ofreciendo en venta bárbaros abalorios. Dicho en pocas palabras: el lugar de ella difícilmente podía hallarse en el más rudimentario mapa de las relaciones sociales en cuanto tales. La única geografía en que hubiera podido encontrarse era la de las pasiones fundamentales. De todas maneras, el camino que el Príncipe había indicado tenía su origen en la previsión de la anunciada partida de su suegro a América en compañía de la señora Verver, de la misma manera que este próximo acontecimiento había aconsejado en un principio, en vista a la discreción, la salida de la joven pareja por no hablar ya de la retirada de todo género de presencias inoportunas, antes de que se produjera el gran desmantelamiento de Fawns. Durante un mes esta residencia quedaría atestada de carpinteros, mozos de carga y otros entregados al embalaje, operaciones que, como llegó a ser notablemente público y notorio —en Portland Place, se entiende—, serían presididas por Charlotte, operaciones cuya escala y estilo no parecieron de tan magna envergadura a Maggie como en aquel día en que los buenos Assingham volvieron a visitarla en su casa marital, cubiertos de serrín y con la cara tan pálida como si hubieran visto a Sansón derribando el templo. Los Assingham habían visto lo que Maggie no había visto; habían visto siniestras y movidas escenas que les causaron tal impresión que se vieron obligados a retirarse; pero Maggie ahora sólo tenía ojos para el reloj con el que medía el tiempo de su marido, o por el espejo —la imagen quizá sea más ajustada— en el que veía reflejado a su marido mientras éste medía el tiempo de la pareja en la casa de campo. De todas maneras, el acceso de sus amigos de Cadogan Place confirió a las relaciones entre los dos cierta resonancia, efecto especialmente notable por las secuelas de un rápido intercambio de impresiones entre la señora Assingham y la Princesa. Con ocasión de interpelar la señora Assingham ansiosamente a su joven amiga, por última vez en Fawns, se advirtió que la amistad de aquélla había osado, después de larga y aceptada privación, ser de nuevo inquisitiva; jamás había cedido tanto a este impulso como ahora en lo referente a la presente y extraña decisión adoptada por los distinguidos excéntricos.

—¿Quiere usted decir que realmente se dispone a quedarse aquí?

Y antes de que Maggie pudiera contestar, la señora Assingham volvió a preguntar:

—¿Y qué hará por la tarde y por la noche?

Maggie esperó unos instantes con una leve sonrisa, ya que podía aún sonreír, y repuso:

—Cuando la gente sepa que estamos aquí, todos los periódicos lo dirán sobradamente, acudirán a centenares desde donde estén, sea donde sea, para vernos. El coronel y usted así lo han hecho. Me atrevo a decir que nuestras veladas en nada se diferenciarán de todo lo nuestro. No serán diferentes a nuestras mañanas y nuestras tardes, con la salvedad de que quizá ustedes dos, queridos amigos, nos ayuden a veces a soportarlas.

Hizo una pausa y añadió:

—Le he ofrecido ir a cualquier sitio, alquilar una casa si es preciso. Pero esto, esto y nada más, es idea de Americo. Ayer le dio un nombre que, según dijo él mismo, era el más expresivo y adecuado.

La Princesa se permitió de nuevo una sonrisa que no expresaba alegría. Pero que aún era posible, y terminó diciendo:

—Como puede usted ver, nuestra locura viene regida por un método.

Estas palabras intrigaron a la señora Assingham:

—¿Y cuál es el nombre?

—Reducción. La reducción de lo que estamos haciendo a su más simple expresión. Así lo dijo Americo. En consecuencia, nada hacemos, y lo hacemos de la forma más extrema, que es la forma que él desea.

Después de lo cual, Maggie añadió:

—Y lo comprendo.

Al cabo de un instante, la visitante de Maggie dijo en un susurro:

—¡También yo! Tuvieron que salir de casa, era inevitable. Pero, por lo menos, aquí el Príncipe no está acobardado.

Nuestra joven amiga aceptó esta expresión:

—No está acobardado.

Sin embargo, tal aceptación sólo satisfizo a medias a Fanny, que alzó pensativa las cejas y dijo:

—El Príncipe es prodigioso, pero ¿qué hay allí que, como usted ha dicho, le acobarda? A menos que sea la proximidad de ella, y si me perdona la vulgaridad, el que ella le vaya detrás.

Fanny calló unos instantes; luego aventuró:

—Sí, esto puede tener importancia para él.

Pero la Princesa estaba preparada para dar contestación a estas palabras:

—Puede irle detrás aquí. Puede venir siempre que quiera.

—¿Realmente puede? —preguntó Fanny Assingham.

—¿Por qué no? —repuso Maggie.

Por un instante sus miradas se encontraron íntimamente. Después la mayor de las dos mujeres dijo:

—Quería decir verle a solas.

—Eso mismo quería decir yo —observó la Princesa.

Fanny Assingham, por razones que ella sabría, no pudo reprimir una sonrisa:

—¡Claro! ¡Por esto se queda el Príncipe!

—Se queda, según he podido averiguar, para aceptar cuanto le ocurra. Para aceptar incluso esto.

Después la Princesa expresó estas palabras como lo había expresado en su fuero interno, sólo para ella:

—Se queda por un alto concepto de la decencia.

Grave la voz, la señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿Decencia?

—Decencia. Por si ella intenta…

—¿Qué? —apremió la señora Assingham.

—En fin, tengo esperanzas…

—¿Esperanzas de que él la vea?

Maggie dudó, pero no dio una respuesta directa. Dijo:

—Es inútil tener esperanzas. No lo intentará. Pero él estaría obligado.

La expresión empleada por la amiga de Maggie unos instantes antes, de la que se disculpó por considerarla vulgar, sonaba todavía en los oídos de Maggie prolongada en su estridencia, como el sonido de un timbre eléctrica cuyo botón se oprime sin interrupción. Expresado en sencillas palabras, ¿no era verdaderamente terrible que la posibilidad de que Charlotte anduviera detrás del hombre que durante tanto tiempo la había amado a ella, a Maggie, hubiera de ser tenida ahora en cuenta? Lo más extraño de todo era, sin duda, que Maggie se preocupara de lo que podía favorecer esta posibilidad y de lo que podía ir en contra de ella, y más extraño todavía era que se entregara en ciertos momentos a vagos cálculos sobre si era concebible que ella sondeara directamente a su marido acerca de aquel problema. Sería monstruoso que de repente, después de varias semanas, preguntara a su marido, como impulsada por una alarma: «¿Consideras que el honor te obliga a hacer algo por ella en privado antes de que se vayan?». Maggie era capaz de medir el riesgo que semejante aventura comportaba para su espíritu; era capaz de sumirse en breves ensimismamientos mientras conversaba, como ocurría ahora con la persona en quien más confianza tenía, aventurando posibilidades. También era cierto que la señora Assingham tenía la virtud, en semejantes momentos, de restablecer el equilibrio al no dejar de adivinar del todo los pensamientos de Maggie. Sin embargo, su pensamiento tenía varias facetas, una serie de facetas que se presentaban sucesivamente. Estaban las posibilidades anejas a la aventura de preocuparse de la cantidad de compensación que la señora Verver todavía pudiera esperar. También se daba la posibilidad de que ésta tuviera el poder suficiente para conseguir de Americo lo que quería, pues no cabía olvidar que lo había conseguido una y otra vez. Contra

esto se alzaba la evidente creencia de Fanny Assingham, de que Charlotte se encontraba en una situación de impotencia, despiadadamente impuesta, o despiadadamente sentida, dada la actual relación entre las partes interesadas, además de todo lo que, desde hacía más de tres meses, había elevado a la Princesa a una convicción parecida. Era cierto que estas presunciones podían carecer de base: sobre todo si se tenía en cuenta que en la vida de Americo había horas y horas de las que, por costumbre, no daba cuenta ni mostraba la más leve intención de hacerlo; sobre todo, si se tenía en cuenta que Charlotte había tenido que ir más de una vez, con el manifiesto conocimiento de la pareja de Portland Place, a Eaton Square, de donde tantos objetos de su posesión estaban en trance de sacarse. Charlotte no fue a Portland Place, ni fue a almorzar en dos ocasiones en que la pareja que vivía en dicha casa tuvo conocimiento de que pasó el día entero en Londres. A Maggie le repelía comparar horas y apariencias, dar vueltas a la idea de si había habido momentos oportunos o fáciles circunstancias en el curso de los últimos días para un encuentro; si en un ambiente que la estación veraniega había limpiado de miradas curiosas, había sido posible una entrevista improvisada. Pero la razón radicaba, parcialmente, en que Maggie, atormentada por la visión de aquella pobre mujer comportándose con tanta valentía por haber hallado el secreto de no dejarse apaciguar, se daba cuenta de que en su mente quedaba poco espacio para alojar una imagen alternativa. La imagen hubiera sido aquélla en que el secreto tan bien guardado era el secreto de un apaciguamiento en cierta manera conseguido, en cierta manera obtenido con coacciones, y luego íntimamente amado. La diferencia entre las dos clases de ocultación era tan grande que no permitía la confusión o el error. Charlotte no ocultaba orgullo ni alegría, sino que ocultaba humillación; y éste era el punto en que la pasión de la Princesa, tan incapaz de vengativos vuelos, arañaba su ternura con más tesón contra el duro vidrio de su pregunta.

Detrás de este vidrio se escondía toda la historia de la relación que la Princesa había intentado ver, pegando la nariz al vidrio; el vidrio que quizá ahora la señora Verver estuviera golpeando frenéticamente, desde el otro lado, a modo de suprema e irreprimible petición. Complacida, Maggie se había dicho a sí misma, después de la última conversación con su madrastra en los jardines de Fawns, que no le quedaba nada más por hacer, y, en consecuencia, podía quedarse con las manos cruzadas. Pero ¿no le era posible avanzar más, y en satisfacción del orgullo personal, descender más bajo en su hostigamiento? ¿No le era posible atribuirle la función de portadora de un mensaje dirigido a Americo, en el que se expresara la angustia de su amiga, y se le convenciera de la necesidad a que estaba sometida? Maggie hubiera podido traducir los golpes de la señora Verver contra el vidrio, como antes he dicho, de cincuenta maneras diferentes, y quizá hubiera podido traducirlos en forma de un recordatorio que podía penetrar muy hondamente: «Tú ignoras lo que es haber sido amado y rechazado después. Nada se ha roto en tu caso, pues en ti ¿qué hay de valioso que pueda romperse? Nuestra relación fue todo lo que puede llegar a ser una relación llena hasta los bordes con el vino de la percepción consciente, y si esta relación estaba destinada a carecer de sentido, a no tener más sentido que el que un ser como tú podía insuflarle para tu dicha, ¿por qué tuviste que esgrimir conmigo el engaño? ¿Por qué tuviste que condenarme, al cabo de un par de años, a ver que la dorada llama —¡sí, la dorada llama!— se había transformado en negras cenizas?». En ciertos momentos, nuestra joven amiga se entregaba a cuanto de insidioso había en estas sutilezas de su piedad, condenadas de antemano, de manera que, a veces, durante minutos enteros parecía sentir el peso de un nuevo deber: el deber antes de que la separación formara el abismo; el deber de abogar por un beneficio que pudiera ser transportado al exilio, como el último objeto de valor conservado por el emigrante, como la joya envuelta en seda antigua, negociable algún día en el mercado de la miseria.

Este imaginario servicio a la mujer que ya no podía defenderse por sí misma era una de las trampas dispuestas contra el espíritu de Maggie en todas las vueltas y revueltas de su camino. El ruido de esta trampa al dispararse, atrapando y reteniendo firmemente la divina facultad, era inevitablemente seguido en un aleteo, de una lucha de alas, e incluso, podemos decir, por el desprendimiento de unas cuantas delicadas plumas. Y así era, pues estas ansias del pensamiento y estos avances de la comprensión muy pronto sentían un golpe que no bastaba para producir su derrumbamiento; sentían el alto que les daba aquella figura tan notablemente delineada que durante las semanas anteriores estuvo en Fawns constantemente cruzando, en las vueltas incesantes que daba, el último término de cuantas perspectivas cabía contemplar. Si Charlotte, con lógicos quehaceres en Eaton Square, había escondido otras oportunidades bajo semejante pretexto, y, caso de hacerlo, hasta qué punto lo había hecho, era tema para la clase de serena ponderación que parecía exclusiva del hombrecillo que seguía avanzando por su sinuoso camino. Era cosa que formaba parte de la misma perseverancia que el sombrero de paja, su blanco chaleco, el vicio de llevar las manos en los

bolsillos, y la frialdad de la atención con que contemplaba sus propios pasos lentos, a través de las gafas firmemente asentadas en el puente de la nariz. Lo que ahora no faltaba nunca como elemento esencial del cuadro era el brillo del lazo de seda con que llevaba atada a su esposa; el inmaterial cordón que Maggie percibió tan claramente durante el último mes pasado en el campo. Ciertamente, el esbelto cuello de la señora Verver no se había liberado del lazo; tampoco el otro extremo del largo cordón —largo en la debida medida, desde luego— se había soltado del pulgar en flexión, oprimido por los restantes dedos, que el marido de la señora Verver mantenía oculto. Percatarse de la función de este cordón, a pesar de lo tenue que era, comportaba ineludiblemente preguntarse gracias a qué mágico arte había sido atado, a qué tensión había sido sometido; pero jamás cabía dudar de la eficacia de su función ni de su capacidad de perdurar. Estos recuerdos eran, para la Princesa, renovados pasmos. Eran muchas las cosas que su padre conocía y que ella todavía ignoraba.

Todo esto pasó por la mente de la Princesa, en rápidas vibraciones, mientras se hallaba en compañía de la señora Assingham. Mientras la revolución de su pensamiento no había terminado todavía, Maggie expresó la idea de lo que Americo, tal como estaban las cosas, debía ser capaz; a continuación sintió la mirada de respuesta de su amiga. Pero Maggie insistió en su idea:

—Debiera desear verla; quiero decir verla como de tapadillo, y en circunstancias de aislamiento, como solía verla, en el caso de que ella pueda arreglárselas para ello.

Con la valentía que su propia convicción le daba, Maggie añadió:

—Debiera estar plenamente dispuesto, estar contento de poderlo hacer, sentirse obligado a aceptar cuanto ella haga, ya que es muy poco, teniendo en cuenta cuál es el final de esta historia. Parece que ahora desee él quedar liberado sin dar nada.

Deferente, la señora Assingham preguntó:

—Pero ¿con qué fin estima usted que deben reunirse en tan íntimas circunstancias?

—Con el fin que ellos quieran. Esto es asunto suyo.

Fanny Assingham soltó una seca carcajada; luego volvió, sin poderlo evitar, a su constante actitud:

—Es usted espléndida, absolutamente espléndida.

La Princesa sacudió impacientemente la cabeza, como si se negara a aceptar una vez más aquel cumplido, lo que motivó que Fanny Assingham añadiera:

—Y si no lo es, sólo puede deberse a la seguridad que tiene usted. La seguridad en él.

A lo que Maggie contestó, sin mirar a Fanny:

—Lo que ocurre exactamente es que no estoy segura de él. Si estuviera segura, no dudaría.

Fanny la acosó:

—¿Segura de qué?

Y se dispuso a esperar. Maggie repuso:

—Pues de que se dé cuenta que siente mucho menos de lo que ella paga, y que esto debiera ser la causa de que la tuviera presente mucho más.

Al cabo de unos instantes, Fanny pudo hacer frente a estas palabras con una sonrisa y dijo:

—¡Puede tener la seguridad, querida, de que la tiene presente! Pero también puede tener la seguridad de que él seguirá estando ausente. Déjele que se porte a su manera.

A lo que Maggie contestó:

—Dejo que haga lo que quiera, pero ya sabe usted cómo soy: pienso. No sin cierta rudeza, Fanny se arriesgó a decir:

—Pensar demasiado es muy propio de su manera de ser.

Sin embargo, esto sólo sirvió para que Maggie incurriera en el acto que Fanny había reprobado:

—Quizá. Pero si no hubiera pensado…

—¿Quiere decir que no se encontraría en la situación en que se encuentra?

—Efectivamente, porque ellos, por su parte, pensaron en todo menos en esto. Pensaron en todo menos en que yo pensara.

Con excesiva superficialidad, Fanny se mostró de acuerdo:

—Y ni siquiera en que su padre pensara.

En este punto, Maggie efectuó una distinción:

—No, esto no hubiera sido un obstáculo para ellos, sabían que la principal preocupación de mi padre era evitar que yo pensara. Después de meditar un poco, añadió:

—En realidad esto es lo que menos desea.

Fanny Assingham quedó profundamente impresionada por estas palabras, lo que la indujo a expresarse con voz más sonora:

—Es un hombre verdaderamente espléndido.

Lo dijo con acento casi agresivo. Fanny Assingham había quedado reducida a eso. Y no le quedó más remedio que manifestarlo. Maggie dijo:

—Eso, sí, lo es.

Después de decir esas palabras, guardó silencio, pero el tono en que las pronunció motivó en su amiga una nueva reacción:

—Ustedes dos piensan con profundidad abismal y, al mismo tiempo, serenamente. Y esto es lo que les ha salvado.

A estas palabras, Maggie repuso:

—Esto es, desde el momento en que descubrieron que podíamos pensar, lo que les ha salvado a ellos. Sí, porque son quienes se han salvado; nosotros somos quienes nos hemos perdido.

—¿Perdido?

—Perdido el uno al otro, mi padre y yo.

A continuación, al ver que su amiga se resistía a aceptar lo que acababa de decirle, lúcidamente declaró:

—Sí, nos hemos perdido el uno al otro mucho más de lo que Americo y Charlotte se han perdido para sí; para ellos esto es lo justo, lo adecuado, lo merecido, en tanto que, en nuestro caso, sólo es triste, extraño y en modo alguno resultado de nuestra culpa.

Maggie guardó silencio unos instantes y prosiguió:

—Pero no sé por qué hablo de mí, es mi padre la persona que paga las consecuencias. Le dejo irse.

—Le deja irse, pero no le obliga.

—Acepto que se vaya.

—¿Y qué otra cosa puede usted hacer? La Princesa repitió:

—Acepto que se vaya. Después añadió:

—Hago lo que desde el principio sabía que haría inevitablemente. Me libero, renunciando a él.

La señora Assingham osó objetar:

—¿Y si es él quien renuncia a usted? ¿Acaso ello no corona el propósito con que se casó, el propósito de transformarla a usted en un ser más libre, y dejarla así?

Maggie le dirigió una larga mirada y repuso:

—Sí, y yo le ayudo a hacerlo.

La señora Assingham dudó pero, al fin, su valentía salió a relucir:

—¿Por qué no llamarlo francamente la coronación de su éxito?

—Bueno, esto es lo único que puedo hacer.

La señora Assingham ingeniosamente observó:

—Es un éxito al que usted, sencillamente, no ha puesto obstáculos.

Y como si quisiera demostrar que no había hablado a la ligera, Fanny Assingham añadió:

—¡Y él lo ha convertido en un éxito para ellos!

Maggie se mostró de acuerdo:

—Así es.

Y enseguida añadió:

—Sí, y ésta es la razón por la que Americo se queda.

—Sin olvidar que también es la razón por la que Charlotte se va. La señora Assingham, envalentonada, sonrió y preguntó:

—¿De modo que él está al tanto?

Desorientada, Maggie dijo:

—¿Americo?

Sin embargo, al instante Maggie se sonrojó al comprender el significado de las palabras de Fanny Assingham, quien dijo:

—Su padre. ¿Sabe lo que usted sabe?

Fanny vaciló antes de añadir:

—Quiero decir, ¿hasta qué punto está enterado?

El silencio de Maggie y sus ojos quitaron filo a la pregunta a la que, para ser decentemente consecuente, Fanny no podía renunciar totalmente:

—Lo que quería decir es ¿cuánto sabe?

Pareciéndole todavía embarazosa, Fanny matizó la pregunta:

—¿Cuánto sabe de lo que ellos hicieron? ¿Del punto a que llegaron? Maggie esperó, pero sólo hasta esta pregunta:

—¿Cree que está enterado?

—¿Que está enterado de algo, por lo menos? Tratándose de él, no lo sé. Está por encima de mí.

—¿Y usted, sí está enterada?

—¿De lo que hicieron?

—De lo que hicieron.

—¿De a qué punto llegaron?

—De a qué punto llegaron.

Fanny causó la impresión de desear averiguar con certeza lo que sabía, pero recordó algo, lo recordó a tiempo, e incluso con una sonrisa:

—Ya le he dicho antes que nada sé, absolutamente nada.

La Princesa dijo:

—En ese caso, ¿nadie lo sabe?

Acto seguido, Fanny aclaró su pregunta:

—¿Nadie sabe cuánto sabe su padre?

Dando muestras de haber comprendido a Fanny, Maggie repuso:

—Nadie.

—¿Ni siquiera Charlotte lo sabe, aunque sólo sea un poco?

—¿Un poco? En el caso de Charlotte, saber algo significaría saber lo suficiente.

—¿Y sabe algo? Maggie repuso:

—Si algo supiera Charlotte, también lo sabría Americo.

—Es exactamente así, ¿y nada sabe?

Con profunda convicción, Maggie contestó:

—Nada sabe.

A continuación de esta afirmación, la señora Assingham preguntó:

—¿Y cómo es que Charlotte está ahora tan dominada?

—Precisamente por eso.

—¿Por su ignorancia?

—Por su ignorancia.

Fanny, dubitativa, preguntó:

—¿Una tortura?

Con lágrimas en los ojos, Maggie repuso:

—Una tortura.

Durante unos instantes Fanny contempló cómo lloraba, y luego preguntó:

—En ese caso, ¿el Príncipe…?

Maggie preguntó:

—¿Por qué está tan dominado?

—¿Por qué?

—¡Esto no lo sé!

Y después de decir estas palabras, Maggie volvió a llorar.

Capítulo XLI

A primera hora llegó un telegrama enviado por Charlotte. «Iremos tomar té cinco tarde, si no tenéis inconveniente. Mando telegrama Assingham almorzar con ellos.» Maggie entregó inmediatamente a su marido este documento que tenía diversos significados, diciéndole que su padre y la esposa de éste seguramente habían llegado la noche anterior o aquella misma mañana y, evidentemente, se habían alojado en un hotel.

El Príncipe se encontraba en su aposento, en donde pasaba a menudo buenos ratos a solas. A su alrededor tenía media docena de periódicos abiertos, entre los que cabía distinguir *Le Figaro* y el *Times*, aunque el Príncipe, con un cigarro entre los dientes y la frente visiblemente nublada, parecía dedicado a pasear por el cuarto. Maggie hasta el momento, al ir al encuentro de su marido, lo cual hacía en los últimos tiempos varias veces, impelida por una y otra necesidad, jamás había recibido una impresión tan clara de fuerza suprema: por ignoradas razones, en el momento de entrar, Americo dio rápidamente media vuelta sobre sí mismo. Ello se debió, en parte a la expresión del rostro de Americo, que parecía como sofocado por la fiebre, lo que trajo a la mente de Maggie la acusación que Fanny Assingham le había dirigido recientemente, bajo aquel mismo techo, de «pensar» de manera impenetrable. Estas palabras habían quedado grabadas en su mente y la habían inducido a pensar más y todavía más impenetrablemente, por lo que, al principio, en el aposento de su marido, se sintió responsable de provocar en él la irritación resultante de unas dudas que ella no había querido provocar. Durante los últimos tres meses, Maggie había tratado a su marido, y tenía perfecta conciencia de ello, animada por una constante idea de la que jamás le había hablado; pero en última instancia lo que había ocurrido era que Americo la miraba de vez en cuando de manera que parecía percibir la presencia no de una idea, sino de cincuenta, diversamente preparadas para diversos usos que debía tener en cuenta. De una manera casi extraña, se dio cuenta de que se alegraba de haber ido al encuentro de su marido con algo tan poco abstracto como un telegrama. Después de penetrar en la prisión de Americo con semejante pretexto, mientras sus ojos se fijaban en la cara de su marido y recorrían las cuatro paredes que encerraban la inquietud del Príncipe, se dio cuenta de la virtual identidad de la condición de su marido con el aspecto de la situación de Charlotte para la que Maggie, a principios de verano y en toda la amplitud de una gran mansión, había hallado la imagen de una jaula cerrada. Americo le causó la impresión de estar enjaulado, de ser un hombre que no podía, sin producir un efecto instantáneo en la sensibilidad de Maggie, empujar instintivamente la puerta que ella no había dejado perfectamente cerrada a su espalda. Americo había estado revolviéndose en veinte distintos sentidos, impulsado por impaciencias que eran exclusivamente suyas; tan pronto Maggie estuvo en su compañía, volvió a parecer que ésta hubiera entrado en su más que monástica celda para ofrecerle luz o alimento. Sin embargo, se daba una diferencia entre el cautiverio de Americo y el de Charlotte, la diferencia consistente en que Americo se encontraba allí escondido por voluntad propia y propia decisión, lo cual quedó reconocido con el sobresalto que la entrada de Maggie le produjo, como si incluso este acto fuera una intromisión. Esto fue lo que delató el temor que Americo sentía a sus veinte ideas, y lo que, al cabo de un minuto, indujo a Maggie a sentir deseos de repudiar o de explicar. Era más maravilloso de lo que ella hubiera podido expresar; era, en todos los sentidos, como si Maggie hubiera comenzado a triunfar sobre Americo en medida superior a sus propias intenciones. Durante estos instantes, tuvo la impresión de que

Americo exageraba, que aquella imputación de propósitos había alcanzado para él una altura excesiva. Hacía un año que Maggie había comenzado a preguntarse cómo podía conseguir que Americo pensara más en ella y la juzgara mejor; pero, a fin de cuentas, ¿qué era lo que ahora pensaba Americo? El Príncipe tenía la vista fija en el telegrama, que había leído más de una vez, a pesar de lo fácil que era comprenderlo, incluso teniendo en cuenta sus implícitas excusas. Durante estos momentos, Maggie sintió unas ansias que casi le causaron miedo. Poco le faltó para dar a entender de una manera u otra lo que dio a entender en los jardines de Fawns ante Charlotte: que había acudido verdaderamente desarmada. Maggie no estaba erizada de intenciones; por la impresión que Americo le causaba en esta ocasión, Maggie apenas sabía qué se había hecho de la única intención con la que había ido al encuentro de su marido. Sólo tenía su vieja idea, la idea que él ya sabía, sin siquiera la sombra de otra. En realidad, cuando hubieron pasado cuatro o cinco minutos, llegó el momento en que Maggie ni siquiera tenía una idea. Americo le devolvió el papel, preguntándole si deseaba que hiciera algo.

Maggie quedó allí mirando a Americo, que doblaba el telegrama como si se tratara de un documento precioso, conteniendo en todo instante el aliento. De repente, y como si fuera resultado de que entre ellos sólo hubiera aquellas pocas palabras escritas, ocurrió un hecho extraordinario. Americo estaba con ella como si fuera suyo, suyo en una gradación y a una escala, con una intensidad y una intimidad, que eran nuevas; que eran algo extraño, algo como la irrupción de una ola que les liberaba del lugar en que habían estado clavados, y les causaba la impresión de estar flotando. ¿Qué fue lo que impidió que al impulso de esta ola Maggie alargara las manos hacia Americo y se abrazara a él, como en pasados tiempos, con el impulso que Americo y Charlotte habían conspirado en secreto para infundírselo? Maggie a menudo había sentido el impulso de abrazarse a su padre. Sin embargo, no hizo todavía nada inconsecuente, aunque no podía decir, por el momento, qué fue lo que la salvó. En el momento en que hubo terminado de doblar cuidadosamente el telegrama, Maggie hizo algo que era meramente útil:

—Sólo quería que lo supieras, no fuese que, por casualidad, no coincidieras con ellos. Sí, porque es la última vez.

—¿La última vez?

—Considero que es su adiós.

Maggie sonrió, como siempre solía hacerlo y dijo:

—Vendrán solemnemente para despedirse con todas las formalidades. Siempre hacen lo que hay que hacer. Mañana se van a Southampton.

Estas palabras motivaron que el Príncipe preguntara:

—Si siempre hacen lo que hay que hacer, ¿por qué no vienen a almorzar, por lo menos?

Ella vaciló, pero halló con notable facilidad la respuesta adecuada:

—Desde luego tenemos que invitarles a almorzar. Te costará poco hacerlo. Pero hay que tener en cuenta que tienen infinitos compromisos y cosas que hacer.

—¿Tantos compromisos tienen que tu padre no puede dedicarte su última noche en Inglaterra?

Le fue más difícil dar contestación a esta pregunta. Sin embargo, también halló una salida:

—Probablemente eso es lo que nos propondrán, que vayamos a algún lugar los cuatro, aunque para redondear la fiesta, también tendrían que asistir Fanny y el coronel. No quieren que vengan a tomar el té, y Charlotte lo dice claramente, los quitan de en medio, a los pobrecillos, se desembarazan de ellos de antemano. Quieren estar a solas con nosotros.

Maggie guardó silencio unos instantes y prosiguió:

—Y si se limitan a almorzar con Fanny y el coronel, y a tomar el té con nosotros, quizá se deba a que tienen el capricho de pasar los dos solos su última noche en Londres.

Había dicho todo lo anterior tal como se le había ido ocurriendo. Fue incapaz de contenerse, a pesar de que, mientras oía sus propias palabras, tenía la impresión de echarlo todo a rodar. Pero ¿no era esto lo más adecuado para compartir el último día de cautiverio del hombre a quien adoraba? Cada momento que pasaba tenía la impresión más clara de estar esperando, con Americo y en la celda de éste, de manera que recordaba vagamente el comportamiento de los nobles cautivos, durante la Revolución francesa, durante el período del tenebroso Terror, que solían celebrar una fiesta o dar rienda suelta a altos pensamientos, con sus pobres últimos recursos. Si Maggie, ahora, lo había hecho todo añicos, si había quebrantado todas las normas observadas en los últimos meses, debía limitarse a comprender que así era, a comprender que aquello que había estado persiguiendo se hallaba, al fin, tan cerca que ya no podía conservar la serenidad. Y su marido bien hubiera podido tener la impresión de que ésta había perdido la cabeza, por cuanto Americo

ignoraba, en todo momento, que la súbita libertad con que su esposa se expresaba no era más que una indirecta de la intensidad con que deseaba abrazarle. También ignoraba que aquélla era la manera con que Maggie —ahora que estaba realmente con él— prescindía audazmente de la suprema norma de tenerlo suspenso en las dudas. Para los hombres y las mujeres de la Revolución francesa no había dudas. El cadalso, para aquellos en quienes Maggie pensaba, era una certidumbre, en tanto que lo que el telegrama de Charlotte anunciaba era, claramente, y salvo un error incalculable, la liberación. Sin embargo, lo importante consistía en que todo estaba más claro para ella que para Americo. La verdad, la libertad de Maggie, para cuya consecución tanto había trabajado, amenazaban con apiñarse sobre su cabeza igual que un grupo de cabezas angelicales, en los poblados haces de luz que desde lo alto penetran por las rejas de la prisión, que regalan, a veces, la enfebrecida visión de quienes están encadenados. Maggie tenía la impresión de que más tarde sabría, que al día siguiente por la mañana sabría con tristeza, sin alguna duda, cuán alocadamente había latido su corazón ante aquella primicia de lo que significaba que les dejaran solos a los dos, y juzgaría con calma incluso aquella avidez por solucionar lo que tan poca importancia tendría, todo lo que no fuera las complicaciones propias de la constante presencia de los otros dos. Y verdaderamente, el caso era que estaba simplificándolo todo mucho más de lo que hacía su marido, y ello quedaba de relieve ante ésta en la expresión de su rostro mientras la escuchaba. Realmente, parecía un tanto desconcertado, en lo referente a su suegro y a la señora Verver, porque cuando Maggie aludió a la posibilidad de que prefirieran pasar una velada con ellos, preguntó:

—¿Pero no es algo así como si se separaran el uno del otro?

—De ninguna manera. No, no es como si se separaran el uno del otro. Sólo dan término a un período, que ha sido tremendamente interesante para los dos, sin que sepan cuándo podrán reanudarlo.

Sí, Maggie podía hablar así del período vivido por la otra pareja. Se sentía segura hasta el punto de afirmar más el dominio que de su terreno tenía:

—Tienen sus razones, tienen muchas cosas en que pensar, cosas que nosotros ni siquiera sabemos. De todas maneras, también cabe la posibilidad de que papá proponga que pasemos juntos las últimas horas. Quiero decir él y yo. Quizá quiera que vayamos a cenar solos, en recuerdo de los viejos tiempos.

La Princesa guardó silencio unos instantes, y prosiguió:

—Quiero decir los verdaderos viejos tiempos, antes de que mi gran marido fuera inventado, antes de que su gran esposa también lo fuera, los maravillosos tiempos en que comenzó a sentir ese gran interés por todo lo que ha hecho a partir de entonces, los tiempos de sus primeros grandes proyectos y oportunidades, descubrimientos y negocios. Los tiempos en que permanecíamos sentados hasta muy tarde, siempre muy tarde, en los restaurantes extranjeros que le gustaban, en todas las ciudades de Europa; allí nos quedábamos, con los codos apoyados en la mesa y casi todas las luces apagadas, hablando de las cosas que había visto durante el día, de las cosas de que había oído hablar, de las ofertas que había hecho, de las cosas adquiridas, rechazadas o perdidas. Y, aunque te parezca increíble, me llevaba a estos sitios debido a que, a menudo, la servidumbre era la única compañía con que podía dejarme. Si esta noche me llevara con él, para recordar los viejos tiempos, a la exposición de Earl Court, ello se parecería un poco, sólo un poquito, a nuestras primeras aventuras.

Mientras Americo la miraba y, en realidad, debido precisamente a que la miraba, tuvo una inspiración que decidió poner en práctica. Si él se preguntaba qué iba a decir Maggie a continuación, he aquí que ésta diría exactamente lo adecuado:

—En este caso, mi padre dejará a Charlotte a tu cuidado durante nuestra ausencia. Tendrás que llevarla a algún lugar, donde pasar vuestra última velada, a no ser que prefieras pasarla, con ella, aquí. En este caso, me encargaré de que os sirvan la cena y de que nada os falte. En fin, podrás hacer lo que quieras.

Maggie no había podido saberlo con seguridad de antemano, y, desde luego, no lo había sabido, pero el más inmediato resultado de estas palabras fue que Americo le dio a entender que no consideraba que estas palabras fueran una burda exageración en la ironía o en la ignorancia. En verdad, nada en el mundo fue tan dulce para ella como las palabras de su marido al intentar reaccionar con la seriedad suficiente para no cometer error alguno. Maggie le había dejado preocupado, lo cual no había sido su propósito, ni mucho menos. Le había dejado desorientado, pero no pudo evitarlo y le importaba relativamente poco. Entonces, se dio cuenta de que Americo estaba dotado de una muy considerable simplicidad, simplicidad que jamás había osado presumir en él. Fue un descubrimiento propio, con el que lo contrastaba todo, en busca de hallar verdadera medida pero que le dio una sensación de novedad. Y, a la luz de este descubrimiento, volvió a percatarse de las muchas cosas de que su marido la creía capaz. Evidentemente, todas estas ideas

eran raras para él, pero Maggie, al paso de los meses, había sabido crear la impresión de que podían ser ideas sustanciosas. Y, ahora, allí estaba él, hermoso y sombrío, contemplando lo que su esposa le había dado. Maggie tenía la seguridad de que en la mente del Príncipe había algo, un conocimiento propio, con el que lo contrastaba todo, en busca de hallar verdadera medida y significado. Americo jamás había abandonado aquello, desde el día, desde semanas atrás, en que Maggie, en su aposento, después de que él se enfrentara con la copa de Bloomsbury, lo había plantado en la mente de su marido, al espetarle, refiriéndose al tema de la opinión que su padre tenía de él, su decidido «Descubre el resto por ti mismo». Al paso de los meses, Maggie se había dado cuenta de que Americo lo había intentado, había intentado averiguarlo, y, sobre todo, había procurado cuidar las apariencias para que ningún conocimiento que pudiera llegarle, procedente de cualquier fuente, fuese con violencia, y sí con una penetración más sutil. Sin embargo, nada había llegado a él, nada con lo que él pudiera contar en su beneficio se había desprendido, para su conocimiento, ni siquiera del anuncio, suficientemente repentino, de la secesión de sus parientes. Charlotte sufría, Charlotte vivía torturada, pero él mismo le había dado motivos suficientes para ello, y, en lo tocante a todo lo demás que hiciera referencia a la obligación que Charlotte tenía de seguir a su marido, este personaje y Maggie habían barajado de tal manera todos los eslabones de causa y efecto que la intención seguía, al igual que ciertas famosas frases poéticas escritas en una lengua muerta, sujeta a diversas interpretaciones. Y lo que renovaba la oscuridad en que Americo se encontraba era la extraña imagen con que Maggie le había hecho aquella oferta en común, por parte de ella y de su padre, de una oportunidad de despedirse de la señora Verver con las debidas formalidades, máxime si se tenía en cuenta que él, de una manera harto patética, no podía permitirse el lujo de rechazarla, so pretexto de apariencia y buen gusto. Sin embargo, para el Príncipe, el buen gusto, en cuanto criterio regulador de su comportamiento, había quedado atrás, ya que, ¿quién podía decir que una de las cincuenta ideas de Maggie, o quizá cuarenta y nueve de ellas, no viniera a decir exactamente que el buen gusto en sí mismo, aquel buen gusto al que el Príncipe siempre había conformado su actitud, careciera de toda importancia? De todas maneras, ahora, el Príncipe estimaba que Maggie hablaba con toda seriedad, y esto suponía la principal razón de que ella se aprovechara como quizá jamás podría volver a aprovecharse. Estaba así reflexionando en el preciso instante en que el Príncipe, en contestación a sus últimas palabras, hizo una observación que, si bien era perfectamente congruente y justa, a ella le pareció, al principio, rarísima:

—Están haciendo lo más prudente. Sí, porque, caso de irse…

Y el Príncipe, por encima de su cigarro, miró a su esposa. Dicho en pocas palabras, sí, en caso de irse aquél era el momento en que debían hacerlo, teniendo en consideración la edad del padre de Maggie, la necesidad de iniciar a Charlotte en las tareas que les aguardaban, la general magnitud del trabajo de asentarse de nuevo, de aprender a vivir en su extraño futuro, habida cuenta de todo lo anterior, ya era hora de que reunieran el valor suficiente para comenzar a ponerlo en práctica. Esto era perfectamente lógico, pero no tuvo la virtud de parar los pies a la Princesa, quien al momento ya había hallado la forma con que revestir su reto:

—¿Pero ni siquiera echarás un poco en falta a Charlotte? Es hermosa, es maravillosa, y su marcha, para mí, es algo así como si fuera a morirse, aunque no físicamente, claro está, ya que es una mujer espléndida y se halla aún muy lejos de renunciar a la vida. Pero, sí, muere para nosotros dos, para ti y para mí. Y el hecho de que nos deje tantos recuerdos suyos, tanta parte de sí misma contribuye a darnos esta sensación.

El Príncipe fumó pensativo durante un minuto, y, al fin, dijo:

—Tal como tú dices, es espléndida, y siempre queda y siempre quedará, con nosotros, gran parte de ella.

La Princesa repuso a estas palabras:

—A pesar de todo, tengo la impresión de que no nos separamos totalmente de ella. Sí, por cuanto, ¿cómo es posible que no pensemos siempre en ella? Parece que su desdicha nos haya sido necesaria, como si la hubiéramos necesitado, en su perjuicio, para formarnos, para que comenzáramos a recorrer nuestro camino.

El Príncipe meditó estas palabras, y les dio respuesta con una pregunta:

—¿Y por qué hablas de la desdicha de la esposa de tu padre?

Intercambiaron una larga mirada, una mirada que duró el tiempo que Maggie necesitó para encontrar una contestación:

—Porque no puedo dejar de hacerlo.

—¿No puedes?

—Si no hablara de ella, tendría que hablar de él. Y no puedo hablar de él.

—¿Te es imposible?

En tono tajante, indicativo de que no iba a repetir jamás aquella negativa, Maggie dijo:

—Imposible.

A pesar de lo cual, Maggie añadió:

—Concurren muchos elementos. Y mi padre es demasiado grande.

El Príncipe miró la punta de su cigarro, y, mientras volvía a llevárselo a los labios, dijo:

—¿Demasiado grande, para quién? Después de dudar, añadió:

—No, querida, no es demasiado grande para ti. Para mí, sí, todo lo que quieras.

—Quería decir que es demasiado grande para mí. Y sé muy bien por qué lo digo. Con esto basta.

El Príncipe volvió a mirarla como si con sus palabras sólo hubiera con seguido aumentar su desorientación. Juzgó que el Príncipe estaba a punto de preguntarle por las razones por las que pensaba así; pero sus ojos mantuvieron su expresión de advertencia en contra, y fueron otras las palabras que el Príncipe pronunció al cabo de un minuto:

—Lo importante es que eres su hija. Por lo menos tenemos esto. Y si puedo añadir algo diré que esto, por lo menos, lo valoro debidamente.

—Sí, sé perfectamente que lo valoras. Y, en cuanto a mí hace referencia, diré que de ello saco cuanto provecho puedo.

El Príncipe también meditó estas palabras, que le indujeron a emitir un sorprendente juicio.

—Charlotte hubiera debido conocerte. Lo veo con toda claridad. Hubiera debido conocerte mejor.

—¿Mejor que tú?

Gravemente, el Príncipe afirmó:

—Sí, mejor que yo. Charlotte no te conocía en absoluto. Y todavía no te conoce.

Pero Maggie exclamó:

—¡Me conoce muy bien!

El Príncipe sacudió negativamente la cabeza, sabía lo que había dicho:

—No sólo no te comprende más que yo, sino que te comprende menos que yo, a pesar de que yo…

Maggie le apremió:

—¿A pesar de que tú?

—A pesar de que yo, a pesar de que ni siquiera yo…

Volvió a callar, y los dos quedaron presos en el silencio. Por fin, Maggie lo rompió:

—Si Charlotte no me conoce, esto se debe a que yo se lo he impedido. He preferido engañarla y mentirle.

El Príncipe, manteniendo la mirada fija en los ojos de su esposa, dijo:

—Sé lo que has preferido. Y yo he preferido lo mismo.

Al cabo de un instante, Maggie contestó:

—Sí, decidí después de haber adivinado cuál era tu decisión. Pero ¿consideras que te comprende, a ti?

—¡Pocas dificultades presenta!

—¿Estás seguro?

—Bastante seguro. Pero esto carece de importancia.

El Príncipe esperó unos instantes, y, luego, fija la vista en el humo del cigarro, bruscamente opinó:

—Es estúpida.

En un largo gemido, Maggie protestó:

—Oh…

Esta exclamación alteró realmente el color de la cara del Príncipe, quien dijo:

—Con ello quiero decir que Charlotte, contrariamente a lo que tú piensas, no es desdichada.

Y habiendo recobrado con estas palabras toda su lógica, añadió:

—¿Cómo va a ser desdichada, si no sabe?

Maggie intentó poner dificultades a la lógica del Príncipe:

—¿Qué es lo que no sabe?

—¿Acaso sabe que tú sabes?

Dijo estas palabras de tal manera que Maggie tuvo conciencia, al instante, de tres o cuatro posibles respuestas. Pero lo primero que Maggie dijo fue:

—¿Crees que eso es lo único que cuenta?

Y antes de que el Príncipe pudiera contestarle, Maggie proclamó:

—¡Lo sabe, lo sabe!

—Bueno, ¿y qué sabe?

Pero ella echó la cabeza atrás, y en movimiento impaciente apartó la mirada de los ojos de su marido:

—¡No hace falta que te lo diga! Sabe lo suficiente. Además, no nos cree.

Esto último sobresaltó un poco al Príncipe, quien exclamó:

—¡Pide demasiado!

Estas palabras motivaron que su esposa emitiera otro gemido de protesta, lo que indujo al Príncipe a formular un juicio:

—Jamás permitirá que la consideres desdichada.

—Sé mejor que nadie lo que jamás permitirá que la considere.

—Tú misma lo verás.

—Veré maravillas, ya lo sé. Las he visto y estoy dispuesta a ver más.

Maggie recordó. No le faltaban recuerdos, y estos recuerdos la movieron a decir:

—Es terrible. La vida de las mujeres es siempre terrible.

El Príncipe la miró con gravedad y dijo:

—Todo es terrible, *cara*, en el corazón del hombre. Charlotte quiere construir su propia vida, y la construirá.

Su esposa, quien se había acercado a una mesa, en donde, distraídamente, modificó la posición de diversos objetos, se volvió hacia él, y dijo:

—En este caso, mientras construye su vida construye también la nuestra, aunque sea un poco indirectamente.

Al escuchar estas palabras, el Príncipe fijó la vista en los ojos de su esposa, y ésta le sostuvo la mirada, mientras decía algo que había estado en su mente durante los últimos minutos:

—Hace poco has dicho que Charlotte no se ha enterado por ti de que yo «sabía». ¿Debo considerar que estas palabras significan que tú aceptas y reconoces mi conocimiento?

El Príncipe hizo los debidos honores a esta pregunta, sopesó visiblemente su importancia, y sopesó también su respuesta:

—¿Consideras que hubiera debido darte de ello muestras más claras?

—No se trata de una cuestión de claridad, sino de verdad.

El Príncipe, enfática la voz, aun cuando con significado ambiguo, murmuró:

—Oh, la verdad…

—Sí, es todo un problema. Pero, a pesar de todo, hay ciertas realidades que verdaderamente existen, como, por ejemplo, la buena fe.

El Príncipe se apresuró a contestar:

—¡Claro que sí!

Después de lo cual dijo, más despacio:

—¡Si alguna vez, desde el principio de los tiempos, ha habido un hombre que haya actuado con buena fe…!

Pero el Príncipe dejó su oferta en este punto. Entonces, cuando pasó el tiempo preciso para que estas palabras se asentaran cual un puñado de polvillo de oro arrojado al aire, Maggie dio muestras de una extraña y profunda aprehensión:

—Comprendo.

Evidentemente, al cabo de un instante, el completo carácter de esta manifestación pareció divino al Príncipe, quien sólo pudo decir:

—Oh, Dios mío, Dios mío…

Ahora, Maggie hablaba con toda libertad:

—Has guardado silencio durante mucho tiempo.

—Sí, sí, sé perfectamente lo que he guardado. Sin embargo, ¿puedes hacer una cosa más, otra todavía, en mi beneficio?

Durante un instante, y hallándose la Princesa nuevamente vulnerable, pareció que estas palabras fueran a hacerla palidecer:

—¿Es que aún puedo hacer una cosa más?

Estas palabras oprimieron una vez más en el Príncipe el resorte de la sensación de lo inexpresable:

—Oh, Dios mío, Dios mío…

Sin embargo, nada había que la Princesa no pudiera decir:

—Haré cualquier cosa. Dime qué es.

—Esperar.

Y la italiana mano levantada del Príncipe, con el juego de sus dedos que aconsejaban, jamás hizo ademán más expresivo. El Príncipe bajó la voz y repitió:

—Esperar, esperar.

Maggie había comprendido, pero habló como si deseara que el Príncipe se lo dijera explícitamente:

—¿A que hayan estado aquí, quieres decir?

—Sí, a que se hayan ido, a que estén lejos.

Maggie insistió:

—¿A que se hayan ido de este país?

En busca de mayor claridad, Maggie tenía la vista fija en el Príncipe, que parecía reflejar una promesa, por lo que incorporó prácticamente la promesa en su respuesta:

—Hasta que hayamos dejado de verles por todo el tiempo que Dios quiera. Hasta que estemos realmente solos.

—¡Si sólo es esto!

Cuando de esta manera la Princesa hubo arrancado, como solía ocurrir, el denso aliento de lo definitivo, que era el ambiente de lo íntimo, de lo inmediato, de lo familiar, durante largo tiempo ausente en el vivir de la Princesa, volvió a alejarse del Príncipe y puso la mano en la manecilla de la puerta. Pero, al principio, la mano de la Princesa quedó allí, sin agarrar la manecilla. Ahora, tenía que hacer otro esfuerzo de dificultad redoblada por todo lo que había pasado entre ellos, el esfuerzo de alejarse del Príncipe, cuya irresistible presencia lo impregnaba todo. Había algo que la Princesa no hubiera podido decir qué era. Parecía que, encerrados los dos juntos, hubieran llegado demasiado lejos, demasiado lejos teniendo en cuenta el lugar en que se hallaban, por lo que el mero hecho de alejarse de él parecía un intento de recobrar lo perdido, lo desaparecido. Maggie se había llevado con ella algo que, al cabo de diez minutos, y principalmente durante el transcurso de los tres o cuatro primeros, había resbalado de ella, por lo que ahora resultaba inútil, ¿o no?, hacer esfuerzos para aparentar tenerlo o recogerlo. En realidad, esta sensación era dolorosa, y Maggie vaciló, intensamente, durante aquel largo momento, casi aterrada ante su infinita capacidad de aceptación. Realmente, bastaba con que Americo presionara para que ella cediera, punto por punto, y en los presentes momentos sabía, mientras lo miraba al través de la nube en que se hallaba, que la confesión de este preciso secreto estaba allí, al alcance de la mano de su marido. Esta sensación fue extraordinaria. Su debilidad, su deseo, en tanto Maggie no se hurtó a ellos, afloraron a su rostro, como una luz o como una sombra. Buscó palabras que lo encubrieran, y volvió a abordar la cuestión del té, igual que si ellos dos no fueran a verse antes:

—Entonces, alrededor de las cinco. Cuento contigo.

Sin embargo, algo le había ocurrido a él, y las palabras de su esposa le proporcionaron la oportunidad de obrar en consonancia. Acercándose a Maggie, dijo:

—¡Pero nos veremos antes! ¿No?

Con la mano todavía en la manecilla de la puerta, Maggie tenía la espalda apoyada en ésta, por lo que su retirada, ante el avance de su marido, sólo consistía en dar menos de un paso, pero ni siquiera aunque en ello le fuera la vida hubiera podido rechazarlo con la otra mano. Ahora, Americo estaba tan cerca de ella que podía tocarlo, olerlo, besarlo, abrazarlo. Casi la apretaba, y el calor de su rostro ceñudo, sonriente, Maggie no podía saberlo, en realidad únicamente hermoso y extraño, se cernía sobre ella con el tamaño desproporcionadamente grande con que sobre nosotros se ciernen los objetos que vemos en sueños. Maggie cerró los ojos, y de esta manera, al momento y en contra de su voluntad, alargó la mano, que encontró la de Americo y la retuvo. Entonces, detrás de sus ojos cerrados, sonó la palabra justa. «¡Espera!» Era la palabra de desdicha y ruego de Americo, la palabra de los dos, era cuanto les quedaba, era su madero en alta mar.

—Espera. Espera.

Maggie seguía con los ojos cerrados, pero su mano, lo sabía, confirmaba la palabra, y al cabo de un minuto comprendió que la mano de Americo absorbía el significado. Él la soltó y dando media vuelta sobre sí mismo se alejó de ella, con aquel mensaje, y cuando Maggie volvió a verle, estaba de espaldas, tal como había quedado al dejarla, con la cara orientada hacia la ventana, fija la vista fuera. Maggie se había salvado, y salió del aposento.

Capítulo XLII

Luego, por la tarde, las características que tuvo la reunión de los dos fueron, dicho sea sin exagerar, notables. Parecía que allí, en el gran salón que miraba a oriente estuvieran consultando notas o templando los nervios aprensivamente, ante la perspectiva de una rígida visita oficial. Mentalmente, en su inquietud, Maggie incluso se burlaba un poco de la ocasión. La fresca estancia de alto techo, en la sombra de la tarde, con los antiguos tapices al descubierto, con el perfecto brillo del amplio suelo reflejando los jarrones con flores, la mesa del té preparada con la plata y los manteles, motivaron que Maggie hiciera una observación en la que quedó reflejado el efecto general que la estancia producía, así como algo que se daba en el modo en que el Príncipe se movía, yendo de un lado para otro:

—¡Somos inconfundiblemente *bourgeois*!

Dijo estas palabras con cierto matiz de tristeza, como si recordara su antiguo vivir en comunidad. Sin embargo, un espectador suficientemente imparcial les hubiera juzgado una pareja privilegiada, de lo cual tenían reputación, siempre y cuando se tuviera en cuenta que estaban esperando la visita de personas de la realeza. Parecían dispuestos, tan pronto les dieran aviso con antelación, a ir juntos al pie de la escalinata, el Príncipe un poco adelantado, avanzando incluso hasta la puerta, e incluso descendiendo algunos peldaños, a pesar de toda su principesca presencia. Era preciso reconocer que corrían momentos propicios para que acontecieran incidentes de magnitud. La quietud septembrina reinaba plenamente, al término del día insulso, y dos de las alargadas puertas vidrieras estaban abiertas, dando a los balcones que dominaban la desolación, a los balcones desde los que Maggie, en primavera, había visto a Americo y Charlotte juntos, mirando abajo, cuando ella regresaba del cercano Regent Park, en compañía de su padre, del Principino y de la señorita Bogle. Ahora, Americo de nuevo salió, llevado por su puntual impaciencia, un par de veces al balcón, y se quedó unos instantes en él. Después de lo cual, regresó a la estancia para comunicar que nada había avistado, y se quedó sin tener otra cosa que hacer. La Princesa fingía leer, el Príncipe la miraba al pasar ante ella, y en la conciencia de aquélla estaba permanentemente el vago recuerdo de otras ocasiones en que había disimulado las apariencias de la agitación, sirviéndose de un libro. Por fin, la Princesa se dio cuenta de que lo tenía de pie ante ella, y levantó la vista. El Príncipe dijo:

—¿Recuerdas que esta mañana, cuando me hablaste de esta visita, te he preguntado si deseabas que hiciera algo especial? Me has dicho que procurase estar en casa, pero esto se daba por supuesto.

Hizo una pausa, mientras la Princesa le miraba con el libro sobre una rodilla y la cabeza alzada. El Príncipe prosiguió:

—Me has hablado de otra cosa, de algo que casi me induce a desear que ocurra. Me has hablado de la posibilidad de quedar a solas con ella. Y si ocurre, ¿sabes para qué aprovecharé la oportunidad?

Maggie esperó en silencio y su esposo dijo:

—Lo veo con toda claridad.

—Es un asunto exclusivamente tuyo.

Pero las palabras del Príncipe la habían obligado a levantarse. Éste dijo:

—Y así será. Le diré que la engañé con mentiras.

Maggie exclamó:

—¡Ah, no!

—Y le diré que lo mismo hiciste tú.

Maggie volvió a sacudir negativamente la cabeza:

—¡Menos aún!

Y de esta manera quedaron enfrentados, el Príncipe con la cabeza erguida, y con su feliz idea, rebosando vida. Luego preguntó:

—¿Y si no se lo digo, cómo lo sabrá?

—No debe saberlo.

—¿Debe seguir creyendo que tú nada sabes?

—¿Y, en consecuencia, quedar en el convencimiento de que soy tonta? Que crea lo que quiera.

—¿Que siga creyéndolo, sin que yo proteste?

La Princesa efectuó un leve movimiento y dijo:

—¿Ya ti qué te importa?

—¿No tengo derecho a corregirla en…?

Dejó que la pregunta del Príncipe siguiera vibrando en el aire, que vibrara el tiempo suficiente para que él mismo la oyera. Y, luego, Maggie repitió:

—«¿Corregirla?».

Y, ahora, la palabra vibró realmente en la voz de Maggie, que preguntó:

—¿Has olvidado quién es?

Después, mientras el Príncipe seguía pasmado, ya que era la primera vez en su vida que había visto a su esposa comportarse de forma tan mayestática, Maggie dejó precipitadamente el libro y levantó una mano, en movimiento de alerta:

—El coche. ¡Vamos!

La lúcida firmeza de este «¡Vamos!» estuvo a la misma altura que la de sus anteriores palabras, y, cuando se hallaron abajo, en el vestíbulo, Maggie dirigió al Príncipe un «¡Ve!», a través de las puertas abiertas y por entre las filas de criados, que incluso estuvo a la altura de estas circunstancias. En consecuencia, el Príncipe, descubierta la cabeza, recibió a la realeza, encarnada en las personas del señor y la señora Verver, en el momento en que se apeaban, en tanto que Maggie se quedaba en el umbral para darles la bienvenida a la casa. Más tarde, cuando de nuevo se hallaban en la planta superior, la propia Maggie sintió todavía con más fuerza el límite que anteriormente había señalado a su marido, y, durante el té, en presencia de Charlotte, Maggie dio un largo suspiro de profundo alivio. Una vez más, era la impresión más extraña que cupiera imaginar, pero la sensación dominante que ella experimentó, durante aquella media hora, era que el señor y la señora Verver hacían todo lo preciso para que la reunión se desarrollara felizmente. Los dos actuaban de acuerdo, de común acuerdo para producir un mismo efecto, que Maggie jamás había observado en ellos, y poco tardó en llegar el momento en que la mirada de Americo se cruzó con la de Maggie, expresando un reconocimiento que no podía reprimir. La cuestión del grado de corrección en los modales que Charlotte se había impuesto se planteó y sólo quedó planteada un instante, ya que enseguida dicha cuestión desapareció, cual hundiéndose, palmariamente, por su propio peso, tal era el grado de espontaneidad del comportamiento de Charlotte, tales fueron las muestras que de serenidad consiguió dar. Pero el matiz oficial, en su belleza y en su seguridad, jamás desapareció. Era como un fresco y alto refugio, como la profunda y arqueada hornacina en que se encuentra una imagen polícroma y dorada, en la que Charlotte estaba aposentada sonriente, esperando, mientras tomaba el té, y recordaba su misión, de acuerdo con su marido. Su misión había tomado una forma definida, y la palabra misión no era más que otro nombre con que denominar el interés de la gran oportunidad que a Charlotte se le ofrecía y que consistía en ofrecer arte y cultura a un lejano pueblo que languidecía en la ignorancia. Diez minutos antes, Maggie había comunicado con suficiente claridad al Príncipe que ella no necesitaba que le dijeran en modo alguno qué era aquello por lo que Charlotte no consentiría la tomaran, pero ahora la dificultad radicaba en elegir, a modo de explícito tributo de admiración, entre las diversas facetas más nobles de Charlotte. Aunque la expresión sea burda, podemos decir que actuaba con un buen gusto y una discreción tales que, durante el primer cuarto de hora, atrajo de tal modo la atención de nuestra joven amiga que quedó apartada de la actitud del oscurecido, casi superado, marido de aquélla. Pero, en esta ocasión, Adam Verver realmente se benefició, incluso ante su hija, de esa tan marcada peculiaridad suya consistente en carecer de actitud en todo momento, y mientras estuvieron reunidos, Maggie siguió teniendo la sensación de que su padre se limitaba a ir tejiendo su telaraña y a sostener su largo y delgado cordón, y tuvo conciencia de que se hallaba en presencia de este tácito proceso, tal como había tenido conciencia de ello

en Fawns. Aquel hombre, aquel ser tan querido, tenía una muy peculiar manera de moverse, estuviera donde estuviera, en todas partes, silenciosamente, para averiguar lo que en ellas había, y el hecho de que ahora recurriera a esa costumbre, a pesar de conocer ya los objetos que tenía ante la vista, expresaba claramente su intención de dejar que su esposa se valiera por sí misma y, más aún, significaba, al entender de la Princesa, desde que pensó de una manera más directa en su padre, casi una especial conceptuación de dichos valores, tal como ahora quedaban de relieve en su rareza, juntamente con una independiente y firme apreciación de su justa y bella pertinencia, por lo que no necesitaban el acompañamiento del leve y contemplativo murmullo que, a veces, emitía el señor Verver.

Charlotte estaba sentada como en un trono, entre su anfitrión y la esposa de éste, y la escena en su integridad había quedado cristalizada, tan pronto Charlotte ocupó su lugar, con el debido porte. La armonía no era menos sostenida por ser superficial, y el único momento en que pudo quebrantarse esta armonía se produjo cuando Americo quedó en pie el tiempo suficiente para que su suegro, vagamente intrigado, le dirigiera una invitación, una llamada, y, entonces, él, a falta de palabras con que responder, seleccionó, para ofrecerle a su visitante, una fuente de *petits fours*. Maggie observó —si es que ahora cabe emplear el verbo «observar»— cómo su marido ofrecía la fuente; advirtió la consumada manera —«consumado» era el término que Maggie empleaba en su fuero interno— con que Charlotte eliminaba de su afectación y de su impersonal sonrisa todo signo que delatara la más leve observación y, después, sintió como si algo se formara lentamente, algo que, al cabo de un minuto, le llegó flotando desde el otro extremo de la estancia, en donde su padre se hallaba de pie contemplando un cuadro de la primera época de la escuela florentina, y con tema sacro, que le había regalado en ocasión de contraer, Maggie, matrimonio. Parecía que su padre diera en silencio su último adiós al cuadro. A ella le constaba que era una obra que su padre tenía en excepcional estima. La ternura que le provocó el que su padre renunciara a semejante tesoro se había transformado, a su parecer en parte de la total efusión, de la inmortal expresión. La bondad de los sentimientos de su padre la contemplaba siempre con benevolencia sobre todo lo restante, cual si el marco fuera realmente la ventana del rostro espiritual de su padre. Ahora, en los presentes momentos, bien hubiera podido decirse Maggie que su padre, al dejar aquel objeto tras de él, para que ella lo conservara, hacía lo que más se parecía a dejarle una parte palpable de su propio ser. Puso una mano sobre el hombro de su padre, y sus miradas volvieron a encontrarse, y quedaron fijas así, en su inalterable felicidad; sonreían emulándose, vagamente, como si el habla no les bastara, por haber llegado los dos demasiado lejos. Y Maggie hubiera comenzado a preguntarse, al instante, si acaso, en estos últimos momentos, no les estaba reservado, como les ocurre a los viejos amigos que se reúnen demasiado a menudo, el que en su relación se produjeran lagunas de timidez.

—¿Está bien, verdad?

—Pues sí, muy bien.

El señor Verver había formulado su pregunta con referencia al cuadro, y Maggie había contestado refiriéndose también a lo mismo, pero después, durante un instante, fue como si sus palabras simbolizaran otra verdad, por lo que los dos dirigieron la vista a cuanto les rodeaba para darles esa extensión. Maggie había pasado un brazo por debajo del de su padre, y los restantes objetos que había en la estancia, los otros cuadros, los sofás, las sillas, las mesas, las arcas, las piezas «importantes», supremas cada cual en su estilo, destacaban a su alrededor, conscientemente, para ser reconocidas y alabadas. Los ojos de padre e hija se fijaban juntos, a la par, en las diversas piezas, una tras otra, apreciando su nobleza, y el señor Verver lo hacía como si de esta manera midiera la sabiduría de antiguas ideas. Las dos nobles personas conversaban sentadas ante la mesa del té, quedando así incluidas en el espléndido efecto y en la general armonía, ya que la señora Verver y el Príncipe habían quedado, aunque fuera involuntariamente, como altas expresiones de aquella clase de muebles humanos que, estéticamente, el escenario exigía. La fusión de su presencia con los elementos decorativos, su contribución al triunfo de la selección, eran completas y admirables, aunque ante una mirada más detenida, ante una mirada más penetrante de lo que la ocasión requería, también hubieran podido figurar como concretos ejemplos de un insólito poder de adquisición. En parte, esto quedó expresado en el tono en que Adam Verver volvió a hablar, sin que se pueda saber a qué punto llegaron sus pensamientos:

—*Le compte y est*. Tienes unas cuantas cosas buenas.

A lo que Maggie repuso sin vacilar:

—¿Muy bellas, verdad?

Los otros dos, al oír estas palabras, centraron en ellos, durante un buen rato, su lenta conversación, una

atención toda gravedad, que fue como una mayor sumisión a la general magnificencia, sentados tan quietos, para ser admirados, como dos efigies de los grandes contemporáneos en una de las plataformas del Museo de Madame Tussaud.

—No sabes cuánto me alegra que hayas venido a echar una última ojeada.

Maggie, al decir, de forma totalmente espontánea, estas palabras, había dado una nota, había dado la nota, la nota de aquel carácter extrañamente aceptado de manera definitiva, entre una y otra pareja, que casi sólo se hurtaba de ser embarazosa por no intentar ser brillante. Sí, en esto radicaba lo maravilloso, en que la ocasión rechazaba la insistencia debido a los vastos valores que la formaban, por lo que la separación se hallaba en una categoría que se hurtaba a las medidas de lejanía. Comportarse de acuerdo con lo que aquellos momentos significaban hubiera equivalido a poner en tela de juicio aquello que constituía su propia base, y ésta fue la razón por la que los cuatro permanecieron suspendidos en lo alto, en el aire, unidos por la más firme decisión de no presionar. Evidentemente, en momento alguno, hallándose cara a cara, Americo o Charlotte habían ejercido presión alguna, y Maggie, por su parte, no necesitaba recordar cuán poco era el peligro de que ella la ejerciera. Ella estaba igualmente segura de que su padre tampoco la ejercería ni siquiera con un dedo del pie. El único problema radicaba en que, como sea que su padre no coaccionaba, Maggie contenía el aliento en espera de ver qué haría.

Al término de tres minutos más, su padre, con cierta brusquedad, dijo:

—Bueno, Mag, ¿y el Principino?

Y, por contraste, estas fueron las palabras de voz dura y verdadera. Maggie miró el reloj:

—He dicho que lo traigan a las cinco y media, y todavía no lo son. Papá, confía en el Principino, que éste no te defraudará.

La respuesta fue:

—¡Éste sí que no quiero que me defraude!

Pero el señor Verver pronunció estas palabras colocándolas en una relación tan explícitamente jocosa con las posibilidades de ser defraudado que incluso cuando, después, llevado por la impaciencia, salió al balcón, Maggie se preguntó durante breves segundos, si la realidad, en el caso de que acudiera al lado de su padre, en el balcón, la alcanzaría o se enfrentaría con ella, allí. Siguió a su padre en cumplimiento de una obligación ya que su padre casi la había invitado, al salir a aquel lugar de temporal aislamiento, a dar a los otros dos aquella oportunidad que Maggie y su marido habían comentado en tan fantásticos términos. Entonces, estando Maggie al lado de su padre, contemplando desde lo alto la gran plaza silenciosa, despejada y, ahora, casi pintoresca, con el extraño, triste, «antiguo», aspecto que adquieren las desérticas calles de Londres en los atardeceres a fines de verano, comprendió una vez más cuán imposible era que aquellos dos sostuvieran semejante conversación, ya que quedarían despedazados, sólo con que tolerasen que sus reprimidas relaciones se manifestaran en una expresión de los ojos. Hubiera sido preciso tener más en cuenta este peligro si el instinto de cada uno de los cuatro —y Maggie podía confiar en el suyo, por lo menos— no hubiera actuado de tan eficaz manera para realzar otras evidentes relaciones entre ellos, relaciones que les permitían comportarse con franqueza.

A consecuencia de la visión del claro panorama que ante sí tenía, Adam Verver dijo:

—Oye, no debes quedarte en esta casa. Desde luego, tienes Fawns a tu disposición, hasta el final de mi contrato.

Con leve desagrado, añadió:

—Sin embargo, Fawns desmantelado, con sólo la mitad de sus muebles y cosas, mucho me temo que no te parecerá un sitio especialmente alegre.

—Así es. Echaríamos en falta las cosas mejores. Sí, las mejores cosas ya no están allí. Volver a Fawns, volver a Fawns…

Hizo una pausa, obligada por la fuerza de sus pensamientos. Dijo:

—¡Volver allá, sin que quede nada bueno…!

Pero, ahora, Maggie no dudó, y expresó su idea:

—No podría soportar volver allá, sin Charlotte.

Al decir estas palabras Maggie dirigió una sonrisa a su padre, y, al instante, vio que éste se fijaba en la sonrisa, lo que le permitió hacer pasar su sonrisa por una alusión a aquello de que no había hablado, ni podía hablar. Y esta alusión era muy clara. En aquel momento, Maggie no podía ni siquiera intentar decir a su padre lo que significaría estar en Fawns, o en cualquier otra parte, echándole, a él, en falta. Ahora, esto se hallaba, y de una forma sublime y exaltada, fuera de lo posible, para ellos. Sin embargo, ¿qué estaba

haciendo ahora Maggie, mientras esperaban que trajeran al Principino, mientras dejaban solos a los otros dos, y mientras su tensión crecía y les amenazaba, qué estaba haciendo, decíamos, sino ofrecer un audaz e importante mensaje que subsistía a aquel otro que era imposible? Además, lo más extraño, habida cuenta del perceptible efecto de la presencia de Charlotte, era la consciente sinceridad de las palabras de Maggie. Maggie tenía clara conciencia de la sinceridad de sus palabras, y las dijo atribuyéndoles todo su valor:

—Papá, Charlotte, y tú lo sabes, es incomparable.

Tuvieron que transcurrir treinta segundos para que Maggie comprendiera que acababa de pronunciar una de las más felices frases de su vida. Ahora los dos daban la espalda a la calle, se apoyaban en la balaustrada, y desde donde se encontraban podían ver gran parte del salón, aunque no el lugar en que se hallaban Charlotte y el Príncipe. Maggie vio inmediatamente que su padre, por mucho que lo intentara, no podría evitar que se le iluminaran los ojos. Ni siquiera lo evitó disimulando al sacar la pitillera y decir, antes que nada:

—¿Puedo fumar?

Maggie le infundió confianza diciéndole:

—¡Papá, querido!

Y, mientras su padre encendía una cerilla, ella pasó otro momento de nerviosismo que, sin embargo, en modo alguno permitió la indujera a las dudas y vacilaciones, sino que aprovechó para reiterar en voz más alta, en voz que bien podía llegar a los oídos de la pareja que se encontraba dentro:

—¡Papá, papá, Charlotte es grande!

Después de haber comenzado a fumar, el señor Verver miró a Maggie y dijo:

—Charlotte es grande.

Habían llegado a una conclusión, conclusión que, se daban cuenta, constituía una base, y sobre esta base quedaron los dos juntos, agradecidos, cada uno de ellos comunicando a los ojos del otro que sus pies se hallaban sobre una base que era firme. Esperaron un poco más, para demostrar mayormente aquella firmeza. Y en gran parte parecía que, de esta manera, el señor Verver quisiera poner de relieve ante su hija mientras pasaban los minutos de oculta conversación entre los otros dos, que, por fin, allí estaba la razón, el porqué. El señor Verver, añadió:

—Ahora puedes ver que estaba en lo cierto. Que estaba en lo cierto, cuando lo hice por ti.

Sin dejar de sonreír, Maggie repuso:

—Desde luego.

Y, después, para demostrar que también ella estuvo en lo cierto, añadió:

—No sé qué hubiera sido de ti sin ella.

Tranquilamente, el señor Verver observó:

—Lo importante era que yo no sabía qué iba a ser de ti. Corrimos un riesgo.

Sonriendo, añadió:

—Por lo menos en cuanto a mí hacía referencia.

Sin dejar de fumar, el señor Verver dijo:

—Bueno, pues ahora vemos el resultado.

—Es cierto.

—La conozco mejor.

—La conoces mejor que nadie.

—Bueno, es natural…

Ante lo cual, mientras la verdad garantizada de estas palabras pendía en el aire —la verdad garantizada por aquél que debía decirla, exactamente en esa oportunidad creada y aceptada—, Maggie se sintió sumamente desorientada, aun cuando con una emoción más sutil de lo que jamás había experimentado, en la visión de lo que esa verdad podía significar. Esta sensación aumentó más y más, aumentó el ritmo en que ella invitaba a su padre a guardar silencio. Y cuando, al cabo de unos momentos más, el señor Verver, volviendo a fumar, y con la vista fija en lo alto, echada la cabeza hacia atrás, y las manos abiertas apoyadas en la balaustrada, en la gris y esbelta fachada de la calle, dijo: «Es hermosa, es hermosa». La sensibilidad de Maggie registró una nueva nota, el matiz de una nueva nota. Aquello era más de lo que ella hubiera podido desear, porque era, como decir con las palabras justas, la nota de la posesión del dominio, y a pesar de ello le comunicó cual nada le había comunicado hasta el presente, la realidad de la inminente separación. Se separaban, a la luz de lo últimamente hablado, de una forma absoluta, en méritos del valor de Charlotte, aquel valor que llenaba la estancia de la que los dos habían salido, como para darle amplia palestra, y en la

que quizá el Príncipe, por su parte, estaba ampliando conocimientos. Si Maggie, en tan tardío momento, hubiera deseado una cómoda categoría en la que clasificar al Príncipe, a fin de desembarazarse de él, la habría encontrado allí, en su regreso a la capacidad de reposar en altos valores. Sin embargo, por razones ignoradas, y recordando todas sus dotes, sus diversos talentos, su poderío… ¡Cuánto atesoraba Charlotte! ¿Qué otra cosa había querido decir Maggie al calificar de grande a Charlotte? Era grande ante el mundo que se hallaba ante ella. Y esto era lo que el señor Verver afirmaba debía ser. Charlotte no podía ser inútil en la aplicación del plan de su marido. Maggie era fiel a esta idea, sí, Charlotte no podía ser inútil. Y el señor Verver, para que su hija se enterase, había buscado de propósito esos momentos de intimidad con ella. En consecuencia, en todo momento, el rostro de Adam Verver estaba mirando a su hija, y, cuando sus miradas se encontraron una vez más, la alegría de Maggie se expresó con las siguientes palabras:

—Papá, es un gran éxito.

Y el señor Verver, en el instante en que el Principino, apareció solo, muy serio y con voz de pajarito saludó, al momento, dijo:

—Es un éxito, y esto, esto tampoco es un fracaso, ni mucho menos.

Pasaron al interior para recibir al muchachito, quien motivó que, al ser introducido en el cuarto por la señorita Bogle, en pie se pusieran Charlotte y el Príncipe, de forma que dicha señorita quitara toda importancia a su propia entrada. La señorita Bogle se retiró, pero la presencia del Principino, por sí sola bastó para aliviar todas las tensiones, y la secuela de esto, en la grandiosa estancia, dio al aire, diez minutos después, algo de la calidad que produce el cese de un constante rumor. La silenciosa paz, cuando la Princesa y el Príncipe regresaron de acompañar a sus visitantes hasta su coche, bien podía decirse que no había sido reinstaurada, sino creada, por lo que cuanto sucedió a continuación estaba destinado a suceder en notable silencio. Y éste fue el caso de un acto tan natural y, al mismo tiempo, tan inútil como el de Maggie al salir al balcón para seguir con la vista la partida de su padre. El coche ya no estaba al alcance de la vista, por cuanto Maggie se había tomado mucho tiempo para subir lentamente la escalinata, por lo que, durante un cierto tiempo, sólo contempló el gris espacio, sobre el cual, aunque todavía más en la estancia a sus espaldas, las sombras del ocaso se habían cernido. Allí, en un principio, su marido no se había reunido con ella, ya que, en compañía de su hijo, cogido de su mano, había subido al piso superior, mientras el niño, como de costumbre, manifestaba pródigamente observaciones dignas de los archivos de la familia. Pero los dos consiguieron presentarse protocolariamente ante la señorita Bogle. Para la Princesa no dejó de tener importancia el que su marido hubiera quitado de en medio a su hijo, sin devolverlo al lado de su madre, pero, ahora, mientras ella se movía indecisa de un lado para otro, todo le causaba la impresión de tener tanto significado que no oía cómo el volumen del coro aumentaba más y más. Sin embargo, esto sobre todas las cosas —el hecho de estar allí, tal como estaba, esperando que el Príncipe viniera y la libertad de estar siempre juntos— era lo que tenía un significado más propio. Maggie se hallaba en el fresco crepúsculo, y lo aceptaba todo, todo cuanto tenía a su alrededor, allí donde cada cosa acechaba, como la razón que justificaba lo que había hecho. Por fin sabía, realmente, por qué, y cómo, había recibido la inspiración y la guía, por qué había sido constantemente capaz, por qué, en todo instante, su alma había estado al servicio de este fin. Allí tenía por fin el momento, el fruto dorado que había resplandecido desde lejos. Sin embargo, ¿qué eran esas cosas, en realidad, para la mano y para los labios, cuando se tocaban, cuando se cataban? ¿Qué representaban, en cuanto a recompensa? Al encontrarse más cerca de lo que jamás había estado de la justa medida de su rumbo, y ante la vista de sus actos, ella sufrió un instante de terror, de ese terror que, cuando ha habido el precedente de la incertidumbre, siempre anuncia al ser que ha de pagar la exactitud de la cuantía. Americo lo sabía. Sí, sabía la cuantía. Seguía teniéndola en su mano, y la demora de su retorno obligaba al corazón de Maggie a latir con excesiva premura, y era como una súbita luz cegadora, en una especulación enloquecida. Maggie había arrojado los dados, pero Americo los cubría con su mano.

Sin embargo, Americo abrió la puerta al fin. No había estado ausente ni siquiera diez minutos. Y en este instante, renovada la intensidad de su visión, Maggie tuvo la impresión de ver el número de los dados. Sólo su presencia, en el momento en que se detuvo para contemplar a su esposa, bastó para elevar la intensidad a su más alto punto, e incluso antes de que él empezara a hablar, Maggie empezó a ser plenamente recompensada. Y teniendo conciencia de ello ocurrió algo extraordinario. Su seguridad en sí misma había hecho menguar de tal manera su terror que, al cabo de un instante, éste se había transformado en preocupación por la ansiedad del Príncipe, una ansiedad por cuanto era profundo en su ser y por cuanto era honesto en su rostro. En cuanto hacía referencia al problema de «pagar» a Maggie, el Príncipe parecía ofrecerle íntegramente la bolsa de su dinero, para que ella tomara cuanto quisiera. Pero lo que al instante

surgió en su mente en la disyuntiva entre el acto del ofrecimiento del Príncipe y su aceptación, fue la conciencia de que debía de acusar a su esposo la impresión de estar esperando una confesión. Esto, a su vez, le produjo un nuevo terror. Si esto era su justo pago, tendría que quedarse sin dinero. El conocimiento del Príncipe estaba allí, cernido, inaceptablemente monstruoso, sabiendo que sería a costa de Charlotte, ante cuya maestría de gran estilo Maggie se había inclinado deslumbrada. En consecuencia, lo único que sabía ahora era que debía estar avergonzada, avergonzada de que se pronunciaran las palabras que se pronunciaron. En resumen, que debía renunciar a ello, allí, y de una vez para siempre.

Con la intención de explicar y de dar fin a la historia, Maggie dijo:

—¿Verdad que es espléndida?

—Realmente espléndida.

Después de cuyas palabras, el Príncipe se acercó a Maggie, quien añadió, para dar mayor solidez a su moraleja:

—Esto es lo que nos ayuda, ¿ves?

El Príncipe estaba ante ella, aceptando, o intentando aceptar, lo que Maggie tan maravillosamente le estaba dando. De insólito y patente modo, intentó complacerla, intentó adoptar la misma actitud que ella, aunque sólo consiguió, estando juntos como estaban con la cara de Maggie ante él, con sus manos en los hombros de ella, toda su actitud envolviendo a Maggie, repetir como un eco:

—«¿Ves?». Lo único que veo eres tú.

Y la verdad de estas palabras, con la fuerza que en ellas había, iluminó, al cabo de unos instantes, de tan extraña forma los ojos del Príncipe que, como impulsada por el temor y por la lástima que le inspiraban, la Princesa se tapó los suyos con el pecho de Americo.

Notas

[1] La traducción literal de esta frase sería: «Ella la ha tratado como mi ornamento y mi gloria». Es, pues, una clara alusión a la reina Victoria. (*N. del t.*) < <